

At Pratt, a Celebration Of Community Service

When Brooklyn community groups needed technical assistance several years ago to design and win government approval for housing for poor, single mothers, they turned to Pratt Institute.

When residents in Greenpoint and Williamsburg met more than a dozen years ago to discuss how to save abandoned and neglected housing, faculty members at Pratt helped to organize a community preservation corporation, provided the group's first director and used students and other teachers to create a redevelopment plan.

That legacy of commitment to community service — a commitment to helping others help themselves, particularly those from modest or disadvantaged backgrounds — was renewed and celebrated yesterday as

‘These people walk through nasty housing with tape measures.’

800 men and women received undergraduate and graduate degrees at Pratt's centennial commencement on the campus in the Clinton Hill section of Brooklyn.

“The quality of people you get out of Pratt is exceptional,” said Gary Hattem, executive director of the St. Nicholas Neighborhood Preservation Corporation, a nonsectarian, non-profit redevelopment organization in Williamsburg and Greenpoint that received Pratt Institute assistance.

60's Advocacy and Pragmatism

“From graphic designers to architects, on the technical level as well as ideological, theirs is not just a 1960's advocacy, but a pragmatic approach to building housing,” he said. “These people walk through nasty housing with tape measures.”

At Pratt, some of the 1960's idealism of community empowerment remains, forged with hard-nosed approaches to acquiring funds and getting things done using a long record of governmental approval. And while other colleges and universities offer community assistance programs and training, urban planners and city offi-

cialists say Pratt Institute is clearly a leader in such efforts.

Founded by the industrialist and philanthropist Charles Pratt with profits from his Astral Oil Company, the institute began as a no-frills school for applied knowledge and practical industrial education at a time when higher education was largely the province of the affluent and concentrated on theoretical training in classics, sciences, languages and the liberal arts.

Pratt's earlier buildings, excluding its free library, the area's first, are sturdy and functional, looking more like factory buildings than structures for higher learning. Pratt's first class was a drawing class, and early programs stressed mechanical drawing, wood carving, nursing and sewing. From the beginning, the institute was open to men and women, and in 1888, admitted its first black student.

Refusal to Leave Brooklyn

“Our tradition is to help people from modest family backgrounds, who need professional degrees, to get that professional ticket to get a step up the economic ladder,” said Richardson Pratt, 65 years old, the institute's ninth president and great-grandson of the founder.

Today, the institute sits on 25 acres and has about 4,000 students in a diverse, racially mixed community of painstakingly restored brownstones, high-rise cooperative apartments and low-income housing developments. Despite some pressure 20 years ago to move from a gritty urban environment after riots in the city and later the Vietnam War protests, Pratt officials stubbornly refused to give up the institute's Brooklyn campus.

“Pratt by its nature cannot be a rural college,” said Mr. Pratt, a former Exxon Corporation executive who became president in 1973. “We have to have easy interaction with professional people of the metropolitan area. We cannot be out in the country, we need practicing architects, designers, and engineers to come here and support full-time faculty as part-time instructors.”

Drawing from urban practitioners, Pratt offers bachelor's and graduate degrees in architecture, art and design, engineering, liberal arts and sciences and computer, information and library sciences. The institute plans to build a Center for Design Excellence on the four-square-block campus that would focus on product design and development mostly for small businesses, in hopes of making



The New York Times/Sara Krulwich

Richardson Pratt, the ninth president of Pratt Institute and the great-grandson of the founder, outside the school's library with a Spanish cannon that came from Havana in 1899.

American products better designed and more competitive in international markets.

Growing Respect for Pratt

This week, Pratt announced that Bruce Newman, an alumnus and a board member since 1983, would contribute most of the money for a \$300,000 outdoor mall and amphitheater project, part of a \$40 million five-year campaign that includes renovation of older campus structures.

Respected within academia, Pratt is increasingly respected in the New York metropolitan region for reaching out to community organizations. Over the last three years, more than 73 community groups in New York State, including at least 20 in Brooklyn, received technical assistance for

development projects from Pratt, valued at more than \$50 million.

“We look at how to build the capacity of community organizations to carry on after we leave,” said Ron Shiffman, director of the Pratt Center for Community and Economic Development.

Through the development center, the institute's community involvement ranges from designing or planning proposals for housing for the homeless to a recent proposal for a new \$60 million Brooklyn stadium Sportsplex in Coney Island for high school and college sports.

“Pratt is willing to take a leadership role in controversial issues,” Mr. Hattem said. “They are willing to get involved in advocacy that other universities are not willing to do.”