

A 101-Year-Old's Advice for New Yorkers

By ALEXANDRA S. LEVINE

Mary Sansone is a loud voice in New York City. And that's saying a lot. She's 101. The Brooklyn resident, who was born in 1916 in what is now Cobble Hill, has been a community activist since she was 12.



"My life has always been organizing," she said, "and I'm not afraid to tell people how I feel." As a child, she and her father would join rallies in Union Square to support unions. After high school, she worked in a Manhattan sweatshop to better understand the working conditions and help laborers organize protests and go on strike. She volunteered with the Red Cross during World War II, among other social service work.

When Ms. Sansone's son died at the age of 31, she started a foundation to encourage other young New Yorkers to find voice and purpose within their communities, just as he had.

So we asked Ms. Sansone for advice on how young New Yorkers can be more engaged in the city and world around them — in big and small ways.

Civic Engagement

- Figure out what your neighbors' needs are and then decide how you can best help, Ms. Sansone said. For example, if that need is housing, the focus could be as broad as improving safety at nearby homeless shelters, or as specific as finding lodging and resources for a local family whose home has burned down, which Ms. Sansone did recently.

"Go to the church and ask, 'Do you think people in this community need help, and what kind of help do they need?'" she said. "Go into the schools and ask the principal, 'Do you have kids that need help, and how can we help them?'"

- Become familiar with your local community board, she advised. The meetings are open to the public and they are an effective place to offer and find help, she said.

Political Engagement

Those who are politically engaged (which is not entirely separate from being civically involved) hold those in power accountable, especially in today's divisive political climate.

"Politicians will talk about, 'I'm going to do this or I'm going to do that,' but it's up to you to see if they're going to do it or not," Ms. Sansone said.

- Attend a city meeting, like one of Mayor Bill de Blasio's town hall events.
- Contact your state senator or a City Council member with questions or to voice your concerns about an issue. "Tell them that you need help or ask them where to go to get help," she said. "Keep calling until you get results. If that doesn't work, send a letter of complaint."
- Use Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms as tools to start conversations, organize and "then publicize so others can come with you," she said. Most importantly, get involved, whether the issue "hits home or not," Ms. Sansone said, because if we "don't get involved, then it starts all over again."

"I've been in demonstrations where people came with Seeing Eye dogs and walkers," she added. "They couldn't see, they couldn't walk, but they came."

Think of them — or Ms. Sansone — as inspiration.