

CLAIRE HAAGA ALTMAN IS PRESIDENT AND CEO OF VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA-GREATER NEW YORK.
KRISTIN FRANZESE IS EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, RETAIL AT THE PLAZA.

Giving Back



As The Plaza looks to our heritage, we recognized a desire for a philanthropic component that will carry forward into the hotel's next century. Since we have already enjoyed a wonderful relationship with Volunteers of America, that incidentally was founded around the same time as the hotel opened, we decided to take the partnership to the next level. —KRISTIN FRANZESE

HauteLife: Tell us about the history of Volunteers of America.

Claire Haaga Altman: It was created in 1896 by an English couple, Maud and Ballington Booth, who came to the United States with a social entrepreneurship message to serve the less fortunate. Their success lay in their ability to bring together people from all income classes and social strata in the name of doing good for those in need. They created an interest in wanting to give not just with monetary donations but through volunteering to distribute food and clothing. They involved entire families in their cause, which was a new and intriguing idea at the time.

HauteLife: What was VOA's goal then and now?

Claire: Maud Booth was an extraordinary woman who wanted to not only help people but also give them a sense of hope. She was a tireless advocate for the poor, the abused, the abandoned, prisoners, and the elderly. And she sought help from all New Yorkers, which is what we continue to do today: forming partnerships with those in the “haves” to help the “have-nots.”

HauteLife: Why is a partnership between The Plaza and VOA a great match?

Claire: There are many parallels between the two organizations. The Plaza is a home away from home for people, in terms of housing and comfort—which is incidentally what VOA did from the beginning, when they actually started a hotel. For 10 cents a night, a man could get a room, a clean towel, soap and hot water, and dinner and breakfast. In our residences today, in both the permanent and transitional ones, you can walk in; be assured of a clean, safe place to stay; and be treated well. Maud Booth brought with her a certain approach to everything she did to make sure it was done well. She distributed food in a horse-and-buggy. She had Christmas wagons

and enlisted her wealthy lady friends to wrap the gifts—much like today, when we organize a birthday party for children in the shelter and take care to make sure the gifts are wrapped beautifully, and that the cake and food is perfect.

We also have a common sense of hospitality. We don't want to be the “shelter” you have to go to because you have been kicked off the street. The food is good. The staff is well trained and they dress well—you won't find them in jeans. We treat people with respect and have a role to play in helping them get back on their feet.

Kristin Franzese: We also share the commonality of the New York experience. If you cross-sect the two organizations, you will find that those who first supported VOA from the beginning and our early guest registers share quite a few names in common, from the Vanderbilts to the Fitzgeralds. It's important for us, as an industry leader, to sow the seeds of social responsibility. We have families who come to stay here, and we want to involve children in some of our programs. With privilege comes that kind of responsibility. And when you look at a property like ours, so rooted in New York that the people of New York see it as their hotel, you know we already have the foundation, given how charitable New Yorkers are.

HauteLife: Volunteers of America's signature Sidewalk Santas have been a New York tradition since 1902. What are the holiday plans you're working on together for this year?

Kristin: The Plaza Santa has been with us for five years now, and besides being one of the few locations in the city to have a Santa you can sit with, we have added literacy programs and afternoon storytelling components as well. Our collaboration will allow us to utilize our Santa to help fund the Hope & Hearth holiday food voucher program.



Claire: For those who can't stop by The Plaza Santa to put money in our chimney, they can go to SidewalkSantaNYC.org to donate to Hope & Hearth.

HauteLife: How are The Plaza and VOA incorporating the trademark redbrick chimneys?

Kristin: A VOA chimney will be placed within our Santa set this year. The Plaza will be the only place in the city to have a physical chimney. We are planning for parts of the proceeds from the photography and being seated with Santa to go toward the food voucher program.

HauteLife: Talk about the benefits of VOA's food voucher program.

Claire: Instead of turning to a soup kitchen or food pantry—all amazing options—this program gives people a chance to purchase and prepare a holiday meal that is special to them. We have relationships with a number of grocery chains in the city where the vouchers can be used as cash for food. This takes into account dietary restrictions, whether medical or religious, and so it's very respectful as well as practical.

Kristin: In addition to The Plaza Santa and the chimney, in The Plaza Food Hall and other Plaza outlets, guests will be invited to round up their bill, as will guests checking out of the hotel, to benefit Volunteers of America's Hope & Hearth program. They will also be invited to stop in and participate in our Gifts of the Heart toy-sorting days.

HauteLife: What are some of the future programs on which you will be collaborating?

Claire: So much of what we do is about trying to normalize life for the children while they are living with us in shelter. Our back-to-school campaign, Operation Backpack®, is an important component of this effort. This year, thanks to the generosity of the New York City community, Operation Backpack outfitted 16,100 children with new, full backpacks—from thesauruses, dictionaries, and a scientific calculator for the older children to watercolors, safety scissors, and glue sticks for the younger ones, along with all the usual school supplies. These children went to school feeling

more prepared, more hopeful, and, very important, looking more like their classmates. This, as well as the birthday parties we throw for these children, is an especially great match with The Plaza because of Eloise, a spunky 6-year-old child just embarking on her school life.

HauteLife: Everyone wants to help, especially during the holidays. Claire, what would you suggest is the best way New Yorkers can make an impact?

Claire: Monetary donations are always best, as they provide us the flexibility to respond where the need is greatest. With public funding we address the crisis; with private support, we can add programming to help empower our clients to break the cycle of poverty. Private support enables us to provide moving-in kits—linens, pots, and pans—for foster youth aging out and getting their first apartments; clothes, diapers, and school supplies for families arriving at our domestic violence shelters with little more than the clothes on their backs; welcome home kits for our veterans; and at holiday time, food vouchers to those struggling to stretch a fixed income.

HauteLife: Do you see this partnership as part of The Plaza's fiber?

Kristin: Absolutely. VOA has held its gala at the Plaza for years, and we've contributed silent auction items and provided culinary talent to curate the menus. But beyond that, the opportunities and possibilities are endless because they are a singular organization with an incredible array of programming that can fit the tastes and interests among our employees and our management team, as well as our guests and customers. Both VOA and The Plaza have rich legacies in this City and it will be exciting to show the public how our histories have intersected and our futures will help connect all the people of this great city.

The Plaza has been an icon for so long. But in the big picture, what does that mean? It is one thing to say it is a beautiful building with all this heritage and meaning, but as an industry leader, in terms of our hospitality program and how we take care of our guests, we have a responsibility to take this to another level and make it a really compelling business model for time to come.