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The East River to the Seine

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By GARY SHAPIRO

Fifth Avenue may have been mistaken for a Parisian boulevard—and the East River for the Seine—one evening last week when the Consul General of France in New York, Philippe Lalliot, honored Paul LeClerc as an officer in the French Legion of Honor.

Before being pinned to Mr. LeClerc's suit, the medal with its red ribbon sat on a royal-red pillow, held by an attendant wearing white gloves. The honor is one that Mr. LeClerc will surely tuck into his suitcase as he heads off to Paris, taking the helm of Columbia University's Europe Global Center.



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Herb Scher

Philippe Lalliot awards the Medal of the Order of Legion of Honor to Paul LeClerc.

In his remarks, the Consul General said not too long ago he learned that Mr. LeClerc's first college degree was in biology: "Certainly a youthful mistake" on the road to a lifelong pursuit of French literature, the Consul General said to audience mirth.

Some of those present best knew Mr. LeClerc through his role as president of the New York Public Library from 1993 to 2011. Marshall Rose, a real estate developer and philanthropist, who was chairman of the NYPL board that hired Mr. LeClerc, told *Heard & Scene* that the library had conducted a large search "looking hither and yon" only to find Mr. LeClerc "in our backyard," right here in the city.

A life trustee of the NYPL, James Duffy, described Mr. LeClerc's tenure at the library as follows: "It was vital when he came. It was more vital when he left."

The Consul General quoted *New Yorker* magazine editor David Remnick, who once put it this way: Mr. LeClerc is "an unassumingly brilliant administrator and Voltaire scholar."

Seen that evening was Jeanine Plottel, who was the head of Romance languages at Hunter College at the time when Mr. LeClerc headed the college while also earning tenure in her department.

Mr. LeClerc, while president of Hunter College, used to amusingly introduce her

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Herb Scher

Medal of the Order of Legion of Honor

by saying, "Meet my chairman."

When it came to describing Mr. LeClerc's period on the faculty of Union College, located in upstate New York, the Consul General paused after pronouncing "Schenectady" correctly. "I did it," Mr. Lalliot said to audience laughter, adding, "I worked on it for hours."

Elaine Cunningham, who was Mr. LeClerc's executive secretary at the NYPL

for 17 years, said it was a joy to see how equally gracious Mr. LeClerc was to library users, staff and donors alike. She also saw "how much he loved his family and how he took care of that love" amid the many demands of the job.

In the audience was an emeritus professor at Columbia University, Robert Paxton, an expert on Vichy; writer André Aciman, who is at work on a novel set in Harvard Square; and Paul Holdenraber, who will host Pete Townsend of the Who at the NYPL, where the latter will speak about his book, "Who I Am: A Memoir."

Nearby were architect Hermes Mallea and interior designer Carey Maloney, who founded the Young Friends of the NYPL in the 1980s, later known as the "Young Lions." The pair were talking with Joel Conarro, the former president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, who attended a benefit for the artist colony Yaddo the previous evening.

Robert Silvers, the editorial polymath at the helm of the New York Review of Books, came by, too. He wasn't far from a professor of anthropology and history at Columbia University, Nicholas B. Dirks.

Mr. LeClerc continues his voluntary service to the wider field of education as a trustee of organizations such as the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the American Academy in Rome, the National Book Foundation and the J. Paul Getty Trust.

The Consul General summed up Mr. LeClerc's ties stretching across the Atlantic.

He said since Mr. LeClerc began his studies at the Sorbonne in 1963, France remained "more than a passion for you—it is second family and homeland, which you have never left."

Mr. LeClerc ended his own remarks by quoting Voltaire: "Where lies friendship, there is one's homeland."

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