

# Building the best benefits

By ALFREDO ALVARADO

**W**ORKERS IN District Council 37 enjoy the most comprehensive union benefits program in the country, but many members know little about the struggles and sacrifices, the creativity and commitment, that built today's wide array of benefits.

Civilian employees had few benefits until Motor Vehicle Operators struck for two weeks in 1962 and social service workers walked the picket lines for the frigid month of January 1965. Their guts and determination won the first union welfare funds and 100 percent city-paid health insurance for nonuniformed employees. A 1971 strike over pension issues tied city traffic up in knots and won health coverage for retirees.

As executive directors Jerry Wurf and Victor Gotbaum welded a loose collection of locals into a strong and cohesive council, DC 37 merged dozens of separate welfare benefits into one financially powerful fund that took its current name, the DC 37 Health and Security Plan, on Jan. 1, 1970.

The plan started with 25,000 members and by its first summer covered 50,000 with dental, disability, drug, optical, and life insurance benefits. In 1971, the plan paid out \$1 million to members.

The seeds of the union's education program were planted on the road to DC 37's most important organizing victory, the December 1965 vote that brought 20,000 hospital employees under the union's umbrella.

## From dead-end jobs to hope

DC 37 Executive Director Lillian Roberts, then associate director, led the drive with wisdom rooted in her background as a Nurses Aide and deep concern that so many hospital workers were stuck in "dead-end jobs" with no promotional opportunities.

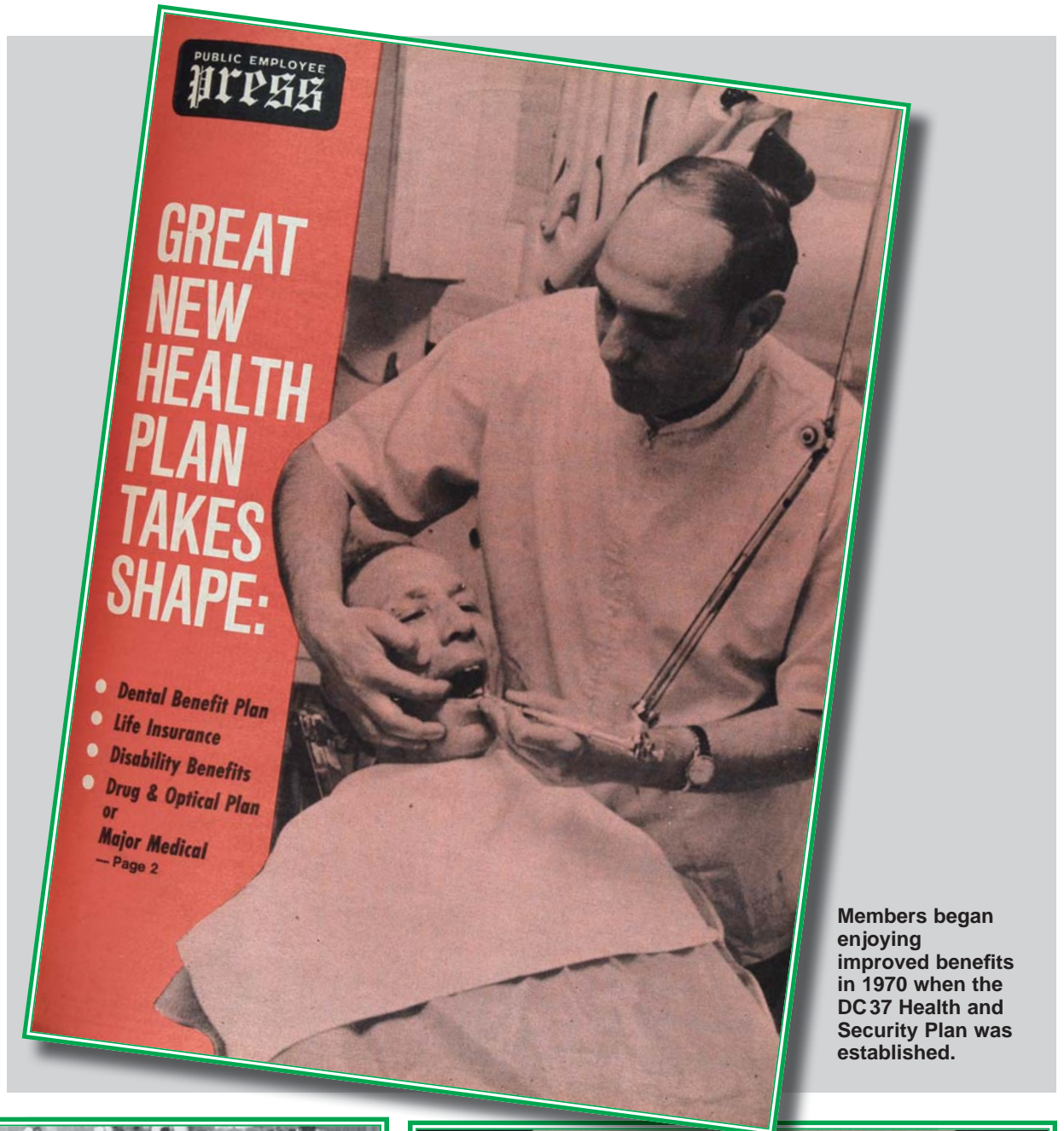
In addition to better pay and working conditions, she offered them hope for a better future through training and upgrading programs. The first classes by the new DC 37 Education Department were for Nurses Aides who worked to become Licensed Practical Nurses, and in 1968 422 members graduated from the intense 14-month course with state licenses.

The education program grew to include levels from "the three Rs" through high school equivalency as well as classes to help city workers pass civil service tests and climb the career ladder. It reached a historic milestone in 1972 when the DC 37 Campus of the College of New Rochelle opened its doors to admit the first 160 members.

According to then-Education Director Bernard Rifkin, "A dream of American labor for more than 140 years" was realized, as DC 37 became the nation's first union with a fully accredited college on its premises. By May 2009, 3,177 union members had received their college degrees from CNR.

Going beyond medical and educational benefits, the union created its Personal Services Unit in 1971 to help members with emotional and family problems, stress, and alcohol and drug abuse. In 2008, the unit's social workers helped 4,452 members.

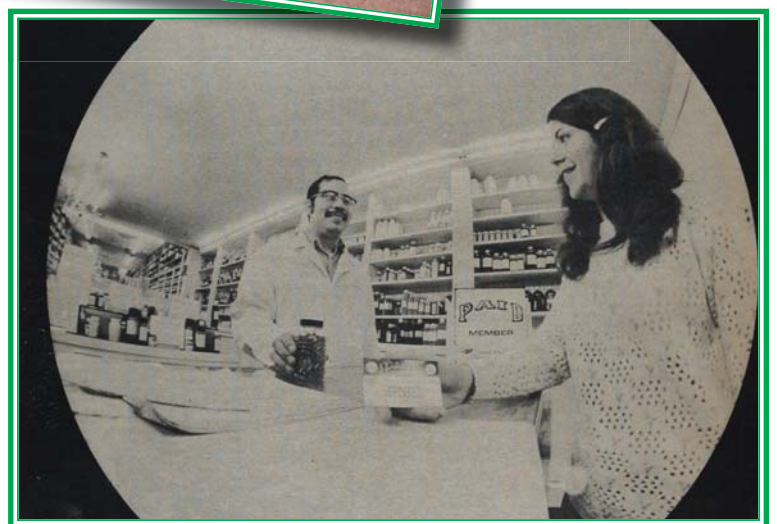
When PSU staff found that many members and union families faced problems that required legal help, DC 37 pioneered the labor movement's first prepaid legal services program with a grant from the Ford Foundation for a pilot project to provide legal services for members. In 1977 the Municipal Employees Legal Services Plan opened its doors.



Members began enjoying improved benefits in 1970 when the DC 37 Health and Security Plan was established.



Nurses Aides graduated as Licensed Practical Nurses when Lillian Roberts's career ladder dream became real for hospital workers.



Former union secretary Roseanne Pizzonia (right) was one of the first members to use DC 37's new prescription drug card.

"The high cost of legal services effectively denied working people their rights," said former DC 37 General Counsel Julius Topol, who served as the first head of MELS. In 2008, MELS opened over 11,000 cases and provided free expert legal assistance for problems such as dealing with an unreasonable landlord, becoming a citizen, getting divorced or drawing up a will.

DC 37 has continued to explore new benefit possibilities. The latest benefit addresses members' need for affordable housing in one of the nation's costliest real estate markets.

Executive Director Lillian Roberts launched the Municipal Employees Housing Program in 2005 in partnership with Neighborhood Housing Services and the city

Dept. of Housing Preservation and Development. MEHP offers members preferences for getting affordable rental apartments and help in becoming homeowners, including financial assistance with down payments and home buyer education.

"There is probably no other program like this in the country for union members," said Roberts. Last year, hundreds of members were working with MEHP on the path toward mortgage refinancing or home ownership, and 61 union families achieved the dream.

"Our members work hard to keep New York City running," said Roberts. "They deserve the very best benefits, and DC 37 has worked for more than a half century to provide exactly that."