DOWNTOWN DIALOGUE
CANYON OF HEROES
BY LIZ BERGER

In Lower Manhattan, we can walk and chew gum at the same time, a fact that helps make the mile-long stroll up Broadway through the Canyon of Heroes a mobile history lesson. Because embedded in the sidewalk along this route are more than 200 black granite strips that tell the story—in chronological order—of each ticker-tape parade the city has held.

When we glance down to read the names of recipients etched into the strips, a popular history of the United States, and a time line for Lower Manhattan, begins to emerge—20 feet at a time.

Some of the names, titles and events inscribed in the Canyon of Heroes remain iconic to this day. Some have grown obscure, and the significance of still others has changed since the crowds gathered and the ticker-tape floated to the street.

Yet every citation for this distinctive New York honor offers a snapshot of the city once upon a time. It's hard to believe, for example, that Richard Nixon was once an American hero, but indeed he was, in 1960, when he made his way up Broadway with President Eisenhower.

Who gets a ticker-tape parade? There are no set criteria, but there are certain themes. Triumph against all odds has often been rewarded—from 23-year old Van Cliburn's 1958 victory at the Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in Cold War Moscow to the Amazing Mets of 1969. A World Series win in general will do it, as with the Mets of 1986 and the Yankees of 1978, 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2000.

Sports heroes abound, such as Althea Gibson, 1957 Wimbledon women's tennis champion. So do war heroes like General John J. Pershing in 1919 and General Dwight Eisenhower in 1945. There are leaders like Winston Churchill in 1946 and Nelson Mandela in 1990, and heads of state like David Ben-Gurion in 1951. There is also plenty of royalty, from Queen Elizabeth II of Britain in 1957, to King Baudouin I of Belgium in 1959, to Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia in 1954 and 1963.

The successful conclusion to an extraordinary journey has often been celebrated. Former President Theodore Roosevelt got a parade after his 1910 African safari. The Apollo 11 astronauts got one after their return from the moon in 1969, and the American hostages in Tehran were cheered after their release in 1981.

Ambitious and courageous undertakings—no matter the resolution—have also been commemorated, like Ruth Elder's 1927 attempt to become the first woman to fly across the Atlantic (she crashed in the Azores) and Genevieve de Galard-Terraube's refusal—as "the angel of Dien Bien Phu"—to leave wounded French soldiers in Vietnam.

One of my favorite parades was the 1984 salute to the more than 200 American medal winners in the Los Angeles Olympic Games. The commemorative strip is in front of St. Paul's Chapel, between Fulton and Vesey. I was a marshal, escorting the Men's Water Polo team and their gold medals up Broadway to City Hall. More than 2 million people came to Lower Manhattan that day to welcome the athletes, led by gymnast Mary Lou Retton.

The Canyon of Heroes was born in 1886 amid festivities for the unveiling of the Statue of Liberty. The parade during that extravaganza was marred by gray skies and drizzle, but office boys brightened the celebration when they dumped huge bins of ticker-tape out the windows of Broadway brokerage houses.

The latest parade celebrated the New York Giants' stunning 2008 Super Bowl win, this time with tons of paper supplied in advance. But the volume of confetti for that one was low—36.5 tons, according to the New York Times—compared with 5,438 tons tossed in the 1945 celebration of victory over Japan.

Joe Timpone, senior vice president for operations at the Downtown Alliance, says part of the reason is windows in newer buildings that often don't open, and building owners who reduced access to rooftops and ledges after 9/11.

Though ticker-tape is gone in the computer age, I always look forward to a ticker-tape parade, a chance to wave from a window or lamp post or street corner and to witness and celebrate the hopes and aspirations of our nation in a signature Lower Manhattan way. Who knows who's next?

- Liz Berger is President of the Downtown Alliance