

LILLIAN WALD (1867-1940)

Wald was born into a wealthy^[3] German-Jewish medical family in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1867. Her father was an optical dealer; her uncle, Henry Wald, M.D., was a University of Vienna trained surgeon who began a New York City medical dynasty at Columbia University in the 1880s.

In 1878, she moved with her family to Rochester, New York. She attended Miss Cruttenden's Boarding and Day School for Young Ladies. She applied to Vassar College at the age of 16, but the school thought that she was too young. In 1889, she attended New York Hospital's School of Nursing. She graduated from the New York Hospital Training School for Nurses in 1891, then took courses at the Woman's Medical College.

Wald worked for a time at the New York Juvenile Asylum, an orphanage where conditions were poor. By 1893, she left medical school and started to teach a home class on nursing for poor immigrant families on New York City's Lower East Side at the Hebrew Technical School for Girls.

The Lower East Side was an incredibly diverse and densely populated area. At the time that Wald was working there^[3], it was also home to a large Jewish immigrant population. In fact, if the Lower East Side was its own city, it would have been the largest Jewish city in the nineteenth century. Many of these families lived in tenement housing, low-rise, cheaply built apartment buildings. Because rents were low, they were the housing choice for many newly arrived immigrants, and it was not unusual for a family of 10 to live in a 325-square-foot apartment. Because of the cramped quarters and lack of upkeep on the buildings, many tenement residents were frequently sick.

After providing health care to a young girl's mother in a dirty, dilapidated tenement, Wald decided to dedicate her life's work to the tenement community. She left medical school and moved with a friend to the College Settlement House on the Lower East Side. In 1893, Wald coined the term "public health nurse" to describe those who worked outside hospitals in mostly poor and middle-class communities. With the help of donors and friend Mary Brewster, she also started the Visiting Nursing Service of New York to bring affordable and

decent health care to the neighborhood. Wald advocated for nursing in public schools. Her ideas led the New York Board of Health to organize the first public nursing system in the world. She was the first president of the National Organization for Public Health Nursing. Wald established a nursing insurance partnership with Metropolitan Life Insurance Company that became a model for many other corporate projects. She suggested a national health insurance plan and helped to found the Columbia University School of Nursing.

In 1894, Wald and Brewster started the Henry Street Settlement House, an organization dedicated to providing social services and instruction in various subjects for the Lower East Side community. Wald's vision for Henry Street was one unlike any others at the time. Wald believed that every New York City resident was entitled to equal and fair health care regardless of their social status, socio-economic status, race, gender, or age.^[8] She argued that everyone should have access to at-home-care. A strong advocate for adequate bed-side manner, Wald believed that regardless of if a person could afford at-home-care, they deserved to be treated with the same level of respect that some who could afford it would be.

The organization attracted the attention of prominent Jewish philanthropist Jacob Schiff, who secretly provided Wald with money to more effectively help the "poor Russian Jews" whose care she provided.

By 1906 Wald had 27 nurses on staff, and she succeeded in attracting broader financial support from Jews and Gentiles alike.

By 1913, the Henry Street Settlement had expanded to seven buildings on Henry Street with two satellite centers. It had 3,000 members in its classes and clubs and 92 nurses making an estimated 200,000 home health calls a year. Wald also made the Settlement available as a meeting place for the NAACP.

Social benefits of the Henry Street Settlement

Arguably one of the most significant changes to the public health sector, the Settlement did much more than just provide better medical care. Primarily focusing on the care of women and children, the Settlement changed the landscape of public health care in New York City. These programs helped to cut

back on time patients spent at hospitals while also making at-home-care more accessible and efficient.

Employment of women

Wald provided a unique opportunity for women and employment through the Settlement. In her letters, she speaks with donors about the employment opportunities that are provided to women through the Settlement and the many benefits they offer.

One of the most notable benefits was the opportunity for women to have a career and to build their own wealth independent of husbands or families.^[7] Employment also provided women with the opportunity to gain independence from their husbands and work outside of the home.

Community outreach and advocacy

Wald also taught women how to cook and sew, provided recreational activities for families, and was involved in the labor movement. Out of her concern for women's working conditions, she helped to found the Women's Trade Union League in 1903 and later served as a member of the executive committee of the New York City League. In 1910, Wald and several colleagues went on a six-month tour of Hawaii, Japan, China, and Russia, a trip that increased her involvement in worldwide humanitarian issues.^[5]

In 1915, Wald founded the Henry Street Neighborhood Playhouse. She was an early leader of the Child Labor Committee, which became the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC). The group lobbied for federal child labor laws and promoted childhood education. In the 1920s, the organization proposed an amendment to the U.S. constitution that would have banned child labor.^[10] In the 1920s, Wald was a vocal proponent of the social welfare initiatives of New York Governor Al Smith, and in 1928 she actively supported Smith's presidential campaign.

Wald was also concerned about the treatment of African Americans. As a civil rights activist, she insisted that all Henry Street classes be racially integrated. In 1909, she became a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The organization's first major public conference opened at the Henry Street Settlement.

Personal life

Wald never married. She maintained her closest relationships and attachments with women. Correspondence reveals that Wald felt closest to at least two of her companions, homemaking author Mabel Hyde Kittredge and lawyer and theater manager Helen Arthur. Ultimately, however, Wald was more engaged in her work with Henry Street than in any relationship.

In regard to Wald's relationships, author Clare Coss writes that Wald "remained in the end forever elusive. She preferred personal independence, which allowed her to move quickly, travel freely and act boldly."^[14] Wald's personal life and focus on independence was clear in her devotion to the Settlement and improving public health.

She died of a cerebral hemorrhage on September 1, 1940. A rabbi conducted a memorial service at Henry Street's Neighborhood Playhouse. A private service was also held at Wald's home. A few months later at Carnegie Hall, over 2,000 people gathered at a tribute to Wald that included messages delivered by the president, governor and mayor.

Legacy

Beyond her work with the Henry Street Settlement, Wald was a tireless advocate for the rights of women, children, immigrants, and laborers. She helped start the United States Children's Bureau, the National Child Labor Committee, and the National Women's Trade Union League. She supported and worked for a women's right to birth control and was a part of the women's suffrage movement. She also lobbied for workplace health and safety.

She initially opposed U.S. entry into World War I but became the Chairman of the Committee on Community Nursing of the American Red Cross once war was inevitable. After WWI, she chaired the Red Cross's campaign to end the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918 and represented the U.S. at International Red Cross Meetings.

In 1922, the New York Times named Wald one of the 12 greatest living American women. She later received the Lincoln Medallion for her work as an "Outstanding Citizen of New York."

Wald died on September 1, 1940 at the age of 73. She was honored at both public and private meetings, including one at Carnegie Hall where 2,500 people

listened to speeches from the governor and mayor praising her work. Wald's legacy lives on in the Henry Street Settlement and the Visiting Nurse Service of New York as well as in countless other ways in which people approach health care

In 1937 a radio broadcast celebrated Wald's 70th birthday, Sara Delano Roosevelt read a letter from her son, President Franklin Roosevelt, in which he praised Wald for her "unselfish labor to promote the happiness and well-being of others."

Wald was elected to the Hall of Fame for Great Americans in 1970. In 1993, Wald was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. The Lillian Wald Houses on Avenue D in Manhattan were named for her.