

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION 4: "City of Immigrants"

Lillian Wald on Establishing the Henry Street Settlement

In the 1890s, Lillian Wald was working as a nurse in New York City. When she visited a patient in the immigrant neighborhood of the Lower East Side, she was shocked at the poor living conditions residents were forced to endure. With a friend, she decided to move to the neighborhood and soon opened the Henry Street Settlement, an organization dedicated to providing social services to the urban poor. Henry Street Settlement was not the only institution of its kind; other settlement houses emerged across England and the United States during this period. In her memoir, Wald describes the experiences that prompted her to establish Henry Street Settlement.

Two decades ago the words "East Side" called up a vague and alarming picture of something strange and alien: a vast crowded area, a foreign city within our own, for whose conditions we had no concern. Aside from its exploiters, political and economic, few people had any definite knowledge of it, and its literary discovery had but just begun. The lower East Side then reflected the popular indifference—it almost seemed contempt—for the living conditions of a huge population. And the possibility of improvement seemed, when my inexperience was startled into thought, the more remote because of the dumb acceptance of these conditions by the East Side itself. Like the rest of the world I had known little of it, when friends of a philanthropic institution asked me to do something for that quarter. . . .

From the schoolroom where I had been giving a lesson in bed-making, a little girl led me one drizzling March morning. She had told me of her sick mother, and gathering from her incoherent account that a child had been born, I caught up the paraphernalia of the bed-making lesson and carried it with me.

The child led me on through a tenement hallway, across a court where open and unscreened closets were promiscuously used by men and women, up into a rear tenement, by slimy steps whose accumulated dirt was augmented that day by the mud of the streets, and finally into the sickroom. . . . [A]lthough the sick woman lay on a wretched, unclean bed, soiled with a hemorrhage two days old, they were not degraded human beings, judged by any measure of moral values. In fact, it was very plain that they were sensitive to their condition, and when, at the end of my ministrations, they kissed my hands (those who have undergone similar experiences will, I am sure, understand), it would have been some solace if by any conviction of the moral unworthiness of the family I could have defended myself as a part of a society which permitted such conditions to exist. That morning's experience was a baptism of fire. Deserted were the laboratory and the academic work of the college. I never returned to them.

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To the first sympathetic friend to whom I poured forth my story, I found myself presenting a plan which had been developing almost without conscious mental direction on my part. It was doubtless the accumulation of many reflections inspired by acquaintance with the patients in the hospital wards, and now, with the Ludlow Street experience, resistlessly impelling me to action. Within a day or two a comrade from the training-school, Mary Brewster, agreed to share in the venture. We were to live in the neighborhood as nurses, identify ourselves with it socially, and, in brief, contribute to it our citizenship. That plan contained in embryo all the extended and diversified social interests of our settlement group to-day. . . .

The mere fact of living in the tenement brought undreamed-of opportunities for widening our knowledge and extending our human relationships. That we were Americans was wonderful to our fellow-tenants. They were all immigrants—Jews from Russia or Roumania. . . .

From this first house have since developed the manifold activities in city and country now incorporated as the Henry Street Settlement. I should like to make it clear that from the beginning we were most profoundly moved by the wretched industrial conditions which were constantly forced upon us. In succeeding chapters I hope to tell of the constructive programmes that the people themselves have evolved out of their own hard lives, of the ameliorative measures, ripened out of sympathetic comprehension, and, finally, of the social legislation that expresses the new compunction of the community.

Source: Lillian D. Wald, *The House on Henry Street* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1915), 2-25.