



Lillian Wald (1867 - 1940)

Nursing is love in action, and there is no finer manifestation of it than the care of the poor and disabled in their own homes. Lillian D. Wald was a nurse, social worker, public health official, teacher, author, editor, publisher, women's rights activist, and the founder of American community nursing. Her unselfish devotion to humanity is recognized around the world and her visionary programs have been widely copied everywhere.

She was born on March 10, 1867, in Cincinnati, Ohio, the third of four children born to Max and Minnie Schwartz Wald. The family moved to Rochester, New York, and Wald received her education in private schools there. Her grandparents on both sides were Jewish scholars and rabbis; one of them, grandfather Schwartz, lived with the family for several years and had a great influence on young Lillian.

She was a bright student, completing high school when she was only 15. Wald decided to travel, and for six years she toured the globe and during this time she worked briefly as a newspaper reporter.

In 1889, she met a young nurse who impressed Wald so much that she decided to study nursing at New York City Hospital. She graduated and, at the age of 22, entered Women's Medical College studying to become a doctor.

At the same time, she volunteered to provide nursing services to the immigrants and the poor living on New York's Lower East Side. Visiting pregnant women, the elderly, and the disabled in their homes, Wald came to the conclusion that there was a crisis in need of immediate redress. She dropped out of medical school and moved into a house on Henry Street in order to live among those who so desperately needed help. In 1893, she organized the Henry Street Settlement, otherwise known as the Visiting Nurse Society (VNS) of New York. The VNS program became the model for similar entities across America and the world.

Wald began with 10 nurses which increased to 27 by 1906 and to 250 nurses serving 1,300 patients a day in 1916. During this same time frame, the budget increased from nothing to \$600,000 a year -- all from private donations. Wald was a fund-raising genius, but the program was also so good and so helpful that it attracted volunteers and contributors.

Wald and her colleagues visited the poor and the forgotten in their five-story, walk-up, cold-water flats. They helped educate residents about germs, about how diseases are transmitted, and stressed the importance of good personal hygiene. They provided preventive, acute, and long-term health care. So successful was the program that it was expanded to include assistance with housing, with employment, with education for exceptional and retarded children, as well as recreational activities.

But Wald's innovations did not stop with the VNS. She persuaded the New York Board of





Education to hire a nurse for the first time; not long thereafter, all schools in New York and elsewhere found it mandatory to have a nurse on duty during school hours. She persuaded President Theodore Roosevelt to create a Federal Children's Bureau to protect children from abuse, especially in the form of improper child labor. She lobbied successfully to change the divorce laws so the abandoned spouse in a marriage could receive compensation in the form of alimony. She helped form the Women's Trade Union League to protect women and prevent their having to work in "sweatshop" conditions.

Wald was also a suffragist who worked to secure the right of women to vote and supported her employee and protégé, Margaret Sanger, in her battle to give women the right to birth control. She fought for peace, leading several marches in protest of World War I. But when war became inevitable, she pitched in to do her part as Chairman of the Committee on Community Nursing of the American Red Cross. She also helped chair the Red Cross campaign to wipe out the influenza epidemic of 1918 and represented the U.S. at International Red Cross meetings.

Wald also took on major industries, lobbying for health inspections of the workplace in order to protect workers. She tried to persuade corporations that protecting the health of their employees made good business sense. She encouraged them to implement preventive medicine and to have nursing or medical professionals on the work site at all times.

Another of her major achievements was persuading Columbia University to appoint the first professor of nursing at a U.S. college or university. Until that time, nursing had been taught in hospitals and consisted largely of supervised work experience. Thanks to Wald, most nursing education now takes place in universities, augmented by practical experience in a teaching hospital.

By the time she reached her fifties, Wald began to receive some of the recognition that she deserved. In 1922, she was named in the New York Times as one of the twelve greatest living American women. Ten years later, in 1932, she was chosen by historian J. Addams as one of the top twelve American women leaders in the past century. In 1936, she received the Lincoln Medallion and was proclaimed the Outstanding Citizen of New York.

Wald died on September 1, 1940, but her legacy lives on in the institutions she helped build. The New York VNS has not only survived but prospered. In the 100 years since Wald gave it birth, the number of employees has increased from 10 to 3,000; the budget has increased from zero to more than \$270 million a year; and the number of people served has increased from 50 a day and 18,000 a year to 2,000 a day and 700,000 a year. The number of visiting or community nursing programs during this same time frame increased from seven to more than 13,000 today.

Wald chose never to marry, but she has thousands of progeny today in the form of home





care nurses, therapists, and aides who were motivated to follow in her footsteps. "Nursing is love in action," said Wald, "and there is no finer manifestation of it than the care of the poor and disabled in their own homes."

In 1934, one year after she retired from her position as head worker of Henry Street Settlement House on New York's Lower East Side, Lillian D. Wald recalled the lesson of her years there. "We have found," she wrote, "that the things which make men alike are finer and stronger than the things which make them different, and that the vision which long since proclaimed the interdependence and the kinship of mankind was farsighted and is true." Wald began her voyage toward this vision in 1893, when she discovered the need for health care among New York's largely Jewish immigrant population. Her solution to this problem, in the form of public health nursing, served only as the foundation of her life's work, which spanned local, national, and international efforts to bring health care and, on a broader scale, social justice to people throughout her ever-expanding "neighborhood." Wald's dedication to the causes of nursing, unionism, tenement reform, woman suffrage, child welfare, and antimilitarism demonstrated her strong progressive faith in the ability of democratic institutions to realize the vision of a unified humanity.

Lillian D. Wald was born on March 10, 1867, in Cincinnati, Ohio, the second daughter and third of four children of Max D. Wald and Minnie Schwarz Wald. The Walds and Schwarzes descended from rabbis and merchants in Germany and Poland, both families having left Europe after the Revolutions of 1848 to seek economic opportunity. Max Wald prospered as a successful optical goods dealer, first in Cincinnati, then in Dayton, and finally in 1878, settling in Rochester, New York, which Lillian Wald considered her hometown. Wald recalled her mother, who married at sixteen, as friendly, warm, and kind; Max Wald was distant, practical, and quiet. The family home overflowed with books and music, and Wald recalled fondly the indulgence of her Grandfather Schwarz, himself a successful merchant, who told her stories and often brought the children presents. Though the Walds were members of Rochester's Reform Temple Berith Kodesh, Lillian Wald received no Jewish education and was raised in a liberal Jewish atmosphere.

Wald received her education at Miss Cruttenden's English-French Boarding and Day School in Rochester. Demonstrating great skills in languages, the arts, math, and science, she applied to Vassar College at age sixteen but was refused because of her age. Wald continued in her studies and led an active social life until she felt the need for more serious work. In 1889, she enrolled in the nursing program of the New York Hospital training school. Upon her graduation two years later, she worked for a year as a nurse at the New York Juvenile Asylum but eventually left institutional nursing to become a doctor. Shortly after she began taking courses at the Women's Medical College in New York, she accepted an invitation to organize classes in home nursing for immigrant families on the Lower East Side.

Wald experienced a "baptism of fire" into reform work during one of her classes, when a child led her to a sick woman in a dilapidated tenement. She saw "all the maladjustments





of our social and economic relations epitomized in this brief journey," and she became intent on her own "responsibility" to bring affordable health care to those on the Lower East Side. She left medical school and, with her friend and colleague Mary Brewster, moved to the College Settlement House on Rivington Street and then to a tenement house on Jefferson Street. In 1895, Wald took up residence at 265 Henry Street where she founded the Nurses' Settlement.

Making health care her first priority, Wald pioneered public health nursing - and coined the name of the profession - with the idea that the nurse's "organic relationship with the neighborhood should constitute the starting point for a universal service to the region." The nurses operated on a sliding fee scale, so that all city residents might have access to medical attention. Nurses responded to calls from physicians, charitable agencies, and individuals in need. They kept daily records and offered educational classes. In 1905 alone, Henry Street nurses had eighteen district centers and cared for forty-five hundred patients. Wald also worked to extend the services of public health nurses. In 1902, she initiated the first American public school nursing program in New York City. In response to her idea, in 1909, Metropolitan Life Insurance Company began a nursing service for its industrial policyholders; other insurance companies soon followed that example. In 1910, as a result of a series of nursing lectures she organized, Teachers College of Columbia University established a department of nursing and health. The National Organization for Public Health Nursing, an association for a profession she herself had founded, chose Wald as its first president in 1912.

Though she was not familiar with the work of Jane Addams when she moved to the Lower East Side, Wald led the Nurses' Settlement in the direction of a full-fledged settlement house - eventually changing the name to Henry Street Settlement - as she saw the social causes of poverty in the neighborhood. She supplemented the nursing service with programs for neighborhood improvement. Working with members of the neighborhood, the house residents organized girls' and boys' clubs as well as classes in arts and crafts, English, homemaking, and drama; they held social events; and rented out the newly built Clinton Hall for union meetings. The house provided vocational guidance and training, and Wald established a scholarship to allow talented boys and girls to remain in school until age sixteen. She spearheaded campaigns for playgrounds and parks, better housing, and to eliminate tuberculosis, called the "tailors' disease" for its preponderance among Jewish immigrants, many of whom were garment workers.

Wald's work with Eastern European Jewish immigrants appealed to the benevolence of New York's German Jewish elite. Betty Loeb, who had funded the East Side nursing classes, and her son-in-law Jacob Henry Schiff, banker and philanthropist, provided Wald with the funds to move into 265 Henry Street. Many of New York's prominent German Jewish families were benefactors of Henry Street, which relied on voluntary contributions for support.

While Henry Street was strictly nonsectarian, Wald saw her settlement work as suffused with spirituality, a "new impulse to an old gospel." As a member of Felix Adler's Ethical





Culture Society, she subscribed to the idea of an evolution of organized religion to a code of ethical precepts. She saw her work as part of this gradual evolution in its strivings toward good will and humanitarianism. She expressed no particular religious connection between herself and the Jewish immigrants with whom she worked, but she embraced the contributions all immigrants made to society. Wald spoke out against Americanization programs that demanded the shedding of native cultures. She considered the newcomers' traditions, art, and ideas "new life and new blood for America." Wald came to see her primary task as that of an interpreter: In the movement toward "the fundamental oneness of humanity," the settlement bridged boundaries of ethnicity, race, class, and immigrant generations. Wald served as an advocate for her neighbors, speaking with the authority of one with "long and intimate acquaintance" with immigrants. In public and private correspondence, she upheld the immigrants' rights to free speech and spoke of immigrant radicalism as another instance of their "passion for progress and justice." Wald defended the character of the new immigrants and asked the mainly German Jewish upper-class audience to consider their own responsibility toward the swelling urban populations at the first convention of the National Council of Jewish Women in 1896. "If there is a strike," she urged, "try to discover both sides of the question...not rejoicing in the workingman's failure without understanding what was behind the discontent."

Wald dedicated much of her time and energy to serving her neighbors' interests through public institutions. With the approval of New York's peddlers, who considered her their representative, she served on the Mayor's Pushcart Commission in 1906. In 1908, she worked on the New York Commission on Immigration, which Governor Charles Evans Hughes formed upon her recommendation to investigate the living and working conditions of New York's immigrants. The commission's report led to the creation of the State Bureau of Industries and Immigration. The next year, Wald worked with Mary Ovington, Florence Kelley, Henry Moskowitz, and others to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, offering up Henry Street for the organizing conference. During the garment strikes of 1910 to 1912, she worked alongside Schiff, Adler, Moskowitz, Louis Brandeis, and Morris Hillquit in arbitration efforts. In 1912, she served as one of three "representatives of the public" on the Joint Board of Sanitary Control of the Cloak, Suit, and Skirt Industry. The board's report called for fire safety and sanitation measures, as well as protective legislation for pregnant workers.

Wald often focused her political energies on the interests of children and working women. In 1903, she supported organizing the National Women's Trade Union League. A lifelong member of the New York Child Labor Committee, Wald, together with Adler, Kelley, and others founded the National Child Labor Committee in 1904 to fight against child labor. Wald originated the idea for a national Children's Bureau within the Department of Labor and worked unceasingly for its creation from 1906 until 1912. She turned down President Taft's offer to be bureau chief in 1912, believing herself more useful at Henry Street. Though not a militant suffragist, Wald believed women had a "special contribution to make" to government as coordinators of "that portion of the





political life that is related to human happiness" - the home and family. As honorary vice-chair of the New York State Woman Suffrage Party, she campaigned for the woman suffrage referendum in 1915, citing in editorials the overwhelming support among her working-class immigrant neighbors for the right to vote.

Wald feared the increasing nationalism and anti-foreigner sentiment that accompanied the campaign for American entry into World War I. She viewed war as opposed to her vision of a unified humanity. As president of the American Union Against Militarism, she, along with Kelley, Addams, Amos Pinchot, Max Eastman, and others, lobbied the Wilson administration toward mediation and away from active involvement. She held fast to her pacifism even when some contributors to Henry Street protested her platform and withdrew support. After the United States entered the war, she fought against abridgments of civil liberties, especially those of immigrants during wartime. She served as chair of the committee on home nursing of the Council of National Defense and headed the Red Cross Nurses Emergency Council, formed in response to the 1918 influenza epidemic. Under her direction, Henry Street cleared all cases of influenza and mobilized the efforts of thousands of volunteers.

Wald's political activities continued after the war. Her work with the American Union Against Militarism led her to contribute to the founding of the League of Free National Association, a forerunner of the Foreign Policy Association. She remained loyal to the Democratic Party's progressive vision, though in 1912 Wilson's refusal to support woman suffrage, and Wald's belief that Progressive Party membership exacted "too great a price," led her to reject both platforms. Wald supported Alfred E. Smith throughout his career - despite his opposition to Prohibition - as someone whose stand on social issues approached her own. She was friends with Eleanor Roosevelt and was enthusiastic about Franklin Roosevelt's policies and his administrative appointments of many former Henry Street residents, including Adolph A. Berle, Jr., Frances Perkins, Henry W. Morgenthau, Jr., and Sidney Hillman. She believed that the ideas formulated experientially at Henry Street were being put to use in government. In 1936, in her final major involvement in an election, Wald co chaired the Good Neighbor League, which attracted independents to the Democratic ticket.

By 1936, periodic heart trouble and chronic anemia began to take their toll on Wald's health. Her travels, which had included a world tour in 1910, a trip to discuss public health measures in Russia in 1924, and a vacation with Jane Addams in 1925, grew less frequent. In 1933, she resigned as headworker of Henry Street Settlement and retired to her house-on-the-pond in Westport, Connecticut. There, in 1934, she wrote the second of her two books - the first was an anecdotal autobiography, *The House on Henry Street* (1915) - a collection of her thoughts on her life experiences titled *Windows on Henry Street*. In 1936, she voiced her opinions on the growing anti-Semitism in Europe, stating that "wrong inflicted upon any one is a wrong done to all," and reasserting her optimism that "common interests" would triumph over ignorance and hatred.

Wald's work has been memorialized throughout the twentieth century. She was chosen as honorary chair or adviser to nearly thirty state and national public health and social





welfare organizations and won the gold medal of the National Institute of Social Sciences in 1912. To honor her role in founding the public health nursing profession, both Mount Holyoke College and Smith College granted her honorary doctorates in law. On her seventieth birthday, in 1937, a public gathering was held in her honor. Laudatory words from President Roosevelt and Governor Lehman were read, and Mayor LaGuardia granted her the city's distinguished service certificate.

Lillian Wald died in Westport on September 1, 1940, at age seventy-three, after a long illness brought on by a cerebral hemorrhage. She was buried in Rochester, New York.

Wald's compassion and good humor drew admirers and supporters from individuals in the many circles in which she traveled. Her confidence, administrative talent, and understanding of the social causes of poverty, together with her membership in the neighborhood she had chosen to join, inspired her to link efforts with her network of women and work toward a vision of a unified humanity. Public figures continue to memorialize Wald and her work. In late 1940, hundreds of her friends gathered in Carnegie Hall to honor her memory. In 1965, she was elected to the Hall of Fame of Great Americans at New York University. In 1993, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York. Wald's vision of a universal "brotherhood of man" - applicable to all peoples, of all backgrounds - allowed her to assume greatness among a generation of Progressive Era figures in the fields of public health nursing, settlement work, and social reform.

>Her greatest living memorial - Henry Street Settlement - still stands on New York's Lower East Side in its three original buildings. Now serving the neighborhood's largely Asian, African-American, and Latino population, the settlement continues Wald's path-breaking work with Jewish immigrants in the 1890s, working toward the realization of her vision of social justice and a unified humanity.

Primary Sources and Questions for Further Discussion

Excerpts from "Address to a Meeting under the Auspices of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People," 1914

"This question of segregation looms up in my mind as of mountainous significance. I see in it an invidious and subtle poison that is being instilled into our national ideals. It is not because it is a political question, or not so much because it is a personal matter to those involved, though this is of grave importance, and should not be minimized, but it is a moral question that we should not dodge. That question involves an eternal principle of dignifying the human being which was proclaimed as the cornerstone of our national edifice and reiterated after the experience of eight-nine years by the best American of them all at the close of the Civil War. Segregation discriminates against the individual without regard to proven worth or ability. No surer way could be found to injure the pride, the dignity and the self-respect of any person or people than to assume that, because of





color, race or nationality, they are unfit to mingle with the community.... It may be called a gross exaggeration to compare the attempted segregation in one of the Government departments to the tragedy of Dreyfus, but it is as potentially grave.... The nation has taken a great task upon itself when it set out to harmonize the different elements that make up our country, that all may get together for one great purpose, namely, free opportunity to each.... That moral deterioration falls upon people who deliberately wrong others, is equally true of a nation.... Without claiming the gift of prophecy, one can foresee that our sins, political and social, must recoil upon the heads of our descendants. We commit ourselves to any wrong or degradation or injury when we do not protest against it."

Excerpts from "Women and War," February 1915

"The final abolition of war and the establishment of permanent peace must depend upon the convictions of men and women, who are equally responsible as they must be in the final analysis for all measures affecting Society.... Women have a message to deliver, and because they are unfettered by custom and expediency, they can point out the hollowness of the appeals by which men have been stirred to battle. Men react to the appeal to their heroism to be ready to go out and die for their country; women would say that the appeal is to go out and kill. Men who love their homes and their children are roused to war fervor "to protect their homes" - but to destroy other homes; "to save their wives and children" - by starving and impoverishing other women and children.... The voices of free women rise now above the sounds of battle on behalf of those women and children abroad - for it is against women and children that war has ever really been waged. Those women and children are not alien to us.... Here in America, on a new continent, with blood drawn from each of the great nations now in the struggle, we have tried out a great experiment; many races, from many states, have demonstrated the logic and practicability of mutual relations. Comrades and friends they are. Their children are in school together; their men and women work in shops and factories side by side. The enmity that is stirred up in order to make men kill each other and to rejoice in the killing, we know to be fictitious."

Lillian Wald Papers, Rare Book and Manuscripts Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations: "Address to a meeting under the auspices of the NAACP." Box 35, Reel 25. "Women and War." Box 35, Reel 25.





How do you think Lillian Wald's work as a community nurse led her to speak out against issues like segregation and war?

Discuss the contemporary significance of the struggles with which Lillian Wald was involved.

What do you think about Wald's vision of America?

Is the "great experiment" successful? How and how not?

Does Wald's example inspire you? How?

Do you feel you have a role in the struggles in which Wald was engaged?

