INTRODUCTION

THE HOUSE ON HENRY STREET STANDS ON THE LOWER EAST Side of Manhattan, a neighborhood of constant change where generations of immigrants and migrants have become Americans and New Yorkers. Built in 1827, the home took on new life in 1895 as a “settlement,” part of a Progressive Era movement dedicated to tackling the problems of poverty by “settling” in and serving impoverished communities. From the sturdy brick building, Henry Street Settlement’s founder—Lillian Wald—built an enterprise that became one of the nation’s most important and renowned social service organizations.

Today, the house at 265 Henry Street is still heart and headquarters of the Settlement, now an expansive network of 18 facilities that delivers a wide range of social services, arts, and health care programs to more than 50,000 New Yorkers each year. It is a special place, mostly because of the countless individuals who have crossed its threshold and found a helping hand and a lifetime connection there, but also because its sweeping history illuminates important stories of the Lower East Side, New York City, and the nation: stories about poverty, and who is worthy of help; immigration, and who is welcomed; human rights, and whose
voice is heard; education, and who deserves it; health care, and who has access to it. Equally important, these stories illustrate the power of bridging divides to foster social change.

Henry Street Settlement would spawn the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, the school nurse, special-needs classes, free school lunches, the first municipally sponsored playground in New York City, and the United States Children’s Bureau. It would help form the NAACP, forge Social Security legislation, create models for the sweeping antipoverty programs of the 1960s, and foster new approaches to homelessness. It would launch legendary institutions—the Neighborhood Playhouse, the New Federal Theatre, and the Abrons Arts Center—and serve as a classroom, a launching pad, or a laboratory for some of the most acclaimed artists of our times: composer Aaron Copland, painter Jackson Pollock, folk singer Jean Ritchie, choreographer Alwin Nikolais, comedian Jerry Stiller, producer Woodie King Jr., actors Anita Velez-Mitchelle, Ruby Dee, and Denzel Washington, and many more. And its expansive dining room table forged a culture of connection. Welcoming all, it brought together neighbors and newcomers, politicians and policy makers, prime ministers and presidents, sociologists, writers, and activists to share meals and ideas, spar over disagreements, cross boundaries—and, in the process, try to create a better world.

The Settlement was born in 1893. On a wet, cold March day, 26-year-old nurse Lillian Wald was on her way to the bedside of a gravely ill young mother. When she arrived at the woman’s squalid tenement home, she was shocked by what she saw—and also by what she’d witnessed on her walk there, through the vibrant but impoverished streets of Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Wald decided to act. She first moved to the top floor of a tenement along with a colleague to provide nursing and aid to immigrants, largely from Eastern and Southern Europe, who had come in search of possibility and found relentless poverty. In 1895, the wealthy German Jewish banker and philanthropist Jacob Schiff—inspired by the work of this young dynamo, like him the child of immigrants—purchased for Wald number 265 Henry Street as a permanent headquar-
ters. From the House on Henry Street, Wald built an approach to health care that focused not just on the patient but on the patient’s environment. She moved from case to cause, curing sickness and then agitating to end the conditions that produced it. What she initially called the “Nurses’ Settlement” became “Henry Street Settlement” and one of the most influential social welfare organizations in American history.

Wald was a voice for those whose voices were not being heard, a powerful female activist at a time when women were increasingly finding their place in a male-dominated public sphere. She was a gifted executive capable of managing a vast, multifaceted organization. She was a savvy networker who had the ears of the powerful and the influential. She was a charismatic connector with a loving demeanor who was able to bridge boundaries of class and culture. Her enterprise—invigorated by the work of other social reformers and human rights activists, the rise of social work, and the professionalization of nursing—put her in the vanguard of the settlement house movement and at the forefront of health care and the fight for social justice, and launched an enduring institution.

The year 2020 marks the 125th year since Lillian Wald walked up the steps of number 265 and into the townhouse with the red brick façade, intent on making a difference in the world. Henry Street Settlement is a remarkable institution because it has survived where so many others have not in a changing nation and a changing New York. It has survived both because of its adaptability as an institution and because of the ingenuity at the core of its mission—the concept of brotherhood, of bringing diverse people together. More darkly, it has survived because the issues it was founded to address—poverty, inequality, racism, income disparity—still persist today.

Henry Street Settlement was flexible, committed to responding to neighbors’ needs, and always, as Lillian Wald said it must, “moving with the times.” It also had a strong guiding vision: that differences were something to be celebrated, and that by bridging divides—of class, culture, and beliefs—we could create a more just world. It was not necessarily unique; it was the vision that drove most
settlements. But it burned especially brightly at the House on Henry Street, founded by the child of immigrants who adopted a stylized version of the Chinese character for “bao,” which relates to brotherhood, as its first logo. Today, President and CEO David Garza calls it “neighbor helping neighbor.”

This book, written to commemorate the Settlement’s 125th anniversary in 2018 and its 125th year at the House on Henry Street in 2020, unfolds in three parts. Part 1 begins with Lillian Wald’s awakening and her response to need at a time of rising urbanization, industrialization, and immigration. It charts the rise of Henry Street and its integrative approach to community health, its place in the settlement house movement, and its blueprint for social action. Part 2 explores Henry Street in the years following World War I, when conservatism tamped down activism—only to watch it rise with the Depression, which summoned a larger role for government in treating poverty. Through the depths of the economic downturn, the split of the nursing service from the Settlement’s social work in 1944, World War II, and the growing tensions of a postwar world, it looks at how Henry Street navigated a new generation and its issues. Part 3 examines what it means to be a neighbor in a new era guided by the tenets of the War on Poverty; the challenges of rising conservatism; and the meaning, significance, and impact of public funding on settlements and their work. And it looks at the Settlement today, as it reenergizes for the 21st century.

A number of issues and ideas run through all these parts, many of them seesawing through time: about changing attitudes toward poverty and how to address it; about who is worthy of support; about professionalization and the role of gender and ethnicity; and about whether the Settlement’s arts programs were geared more for a downtown or an uptown crowd. Many of these issues are unnervingly similar to those that face America at the close of the second decade of the 21st century. You can hear the anti-immigration vitriol of the late 1800s in the cries for a wall on America’s southern border in 2019. You can feel the 1930s’ disappointment over the failure to pass universal health care in the
fights over coverage today. And you can feel the anger over Gilded Age income inequality in today’s tensions over the rise of the one percent.

The persistence of these and other issues is one reason why Henry Street’s story is as relevant today as it was more than a century ago. So are its guiding principles and enduring lessons, which together make up the blueprint for social justice that Lillian Wald created many years ago and which continues to guide the Settlement today.

Each of us is whole and worthy. Even though many saw the immigrant newcomers who arrived at the turn of the 19th century as threats, Henry Street celebrated new arrivals—and those in need—as individuals with their own beliefs, hopes, and dreams to be respected and nourished.

Poverty is a social issue. Lillian Wald, like other settlement house leaders, believed that disease and poverty were not individual shortcomings, but social problems that should be confronted by the larger forces of government and society.

There is power in bridging differences. By celebrating what Lillian Wald called the “power of association,” Henry Street created relationships that were rare in a city divided by class, race, and ethnicity. Even though settlement workers no longer live in the houses where they work, the way the first generation did, the power of people working together in a community still defines Henry Street.

Neighbors matter. By living where they worked, early settlement house workers created a new relationship between service providers and their communities. Wald called it being a “neighbor.” Today, Henry Street President and CEO David Garza calls it the “transformational power of relationship.”

This book, which is rooted in the life of a special house and animated by the many people who have crossed its threshold, is not just about the challenges, but about the best possibilities of urban life and the enduring lessons that are worthy of our attention today.