

# LILLIAN WALD

b. March 10, 1867

d. September 1, 1940

## COMMUNITY NURSING FOUNDER

*“Nursing is love in action ...”*

**She pioneered, and  
coined the term,  
“public health nursing.”**

Lillian Wald was a social reformer and the founder of the American community nursing movement. Her visionary leadership in public health; women and children's welfare; and labor, immigrants' and civil rights led to the formation of countless institutions worldwide.

Wald was born to a German Jewish middle-class family in Cincinnati, Ohio. After graduating in 1891 from the nursing program at the New York Hospital Training School, she took a job at the New York Juvenile Asylum, an orphanage, where she quickly grew disillusioned with institutional methods of child care. As her biographer and friend, R. L. Duffus, commented, “She had too much individuality to be willing to lose herself as a cog in an established institution. Instinctively, she wanted to change things—to do better.”

Wald attended medical school briefly. During this time, she witnessed firsthand the poverty and hardship endured by immigrants on New York's Lower East Side. She resolved to bring affordable health care to those in need.

In 1893 Wald quit medical school and organized the Henry Street Settlement, otherwise known as the Visiting Nurse Society (VNS) of New York. The VNS operated on a sliding fee scale to provide all city residents with an opportunity to access medical care. Wald pioneered, and coined the term, “public health nursing” with the belief that the nurse's “organic relationship with the neighborhood should constitute the starting point for a universal service to the region.” By 1913, through her tireless efforts, the VNS grew from 10 to 92 nurses, making 200,000 visits annually. It became a model for similar entities across the nation and around the globe.

Wald became a highly influential advocate at the city, state and national levels. She persuaded the New York Board of Education to initiate the first American public school nursing program in Manhattan. She successfully lobbied President Theodore Roosevelt to create a Federal Children's Bureau to protect children from abusive child labor, and she helped form the Women's Trade Union to protect women working in sweatshops. She campaigned for women's suffrage and supported racial integration, helping to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Upon her recommendation, The New York Commission on Immigration was formed to investigate the living and working conditions of immigrants.

Wald did not marry and maintained her closest relationships with women. Although she did not self-identify as a lesbian, her letters reveal the intimate affection she felt for at least two of her companions, Mabel Hyde Kittredge and Helen Arthur.

Wald died of a stroke at the age of 73.

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