

AMERICAN LIVES **Jane Addams**
Helping the Poor—and the Well-to-Do

“Insanitary housing, poisonous sewage, contaminated water, infant mortality, the spread of contagion, adulterated food, impure milk, smoke-laden air, ill-ventilated factories, dangerous occupations, juvenile crime, unwholesome crowding, prostitution, and drunkenness are the enemies which the modern city must face and overcome would it survive.”— Jane Addams, “Utilization of Women in City Government” (1907)

Jane Addams (1860–1935) dedicated herself to helping the many poor U.S. immigrants at the turn of the century. In the process of helping them, she also aimed to help even the middle class.

Illinois-born Jane Addams was little more than two when her mother died, and she was raised by her father. He was a successful businessman, and she loved him deeply. She attended college—unusual for females of her time—but the same year that she graduated, her father died. Plagued by frail health and dissatisfied with the restrictions of her middle-class life, Addams drifted for a few years. Then, on a tour of Europe with her college roommate, Ellen Gates Starr, she visited a settlement house in London. At Addams’s urging, the two decided to create such a house in the United States.

They returned to the United States and in 1889 purchased a rundown mansion in Chicago. Hull House, as it was called, had been in the suburbs of Chicago when it was built. Now it was surrounded by tenements housing immigrants. It was the perfect location for their idea.

Addams and Starr did not know exactly what to do at first. One of their first programs offered the nearby Italian immigrants a chance to hear a novel read aloud in Italian and see photographs of Italy. The event was not a success. Soon, though, they saw a need: to create a kindergarten for the immigrants’ young children. It was welcomed eagerly and launched many years of helpful programs. Eventually Hull House provided art and craft classes, created a theater group, and offered classes teaching English and job skills. The settlement house grew to be a large complex of buildings visited by some two thousand Chicagoans each week.

From the start, Hull House had two purposes. It was intended not only to help the poor immigrants but also to provide benefits for the middle class. Addams and Starr wished to give privileged young people—especially young women—a chance

to learn skills, experience life, and take part in important activity. By working at the settlement house, they could avoid “being cultivated into un nourished and over-sensitive lives.”

They attracted many talented people to their work. Those who worked at Hull House backed such causes as improving urban sanitation and ending child labor. They convinced Illinois to require safety inspections in factories and to create the first court system for juveniles.

While Addams and Starr worked together at Hull House, Addams was the chief spokeswoman for the effort. In countless speeches and articles and a number of books, she backed various social reforms. She also became a powerful voice on behalf of opportunities for women.

In later years, she embraced the cause of peace. This position cost her some support during World War I, but she did not hesitate to take her stand. She became president of the Woman’s International League for Peace and Freedom in 1919 and was a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union the next year. For her peace efforts, she won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. She died just four years later.

Questions

1. What kind of programs do you think helped immigrants the most?
2. What opportunities were available to middle-class women in Addams’s time?
3. Would it be helpful to have settlement houses or similar programs in cities today?