Remembering Lillian Wald

The U.S. should proclaim a national holiday ... and celebrate the birthday of Lillian Wald who was born on March 10, 1867. Even a cursory examination of the record will show that her contributions to society equal or surpass such venerated women as Susan B. Anthony, Clara Barton, and Margaret Sanger. Ms. Wald deserves to be better remembered and honored. “She was a nurse, social worker, public health official, teacher, author, editor, publisher, women’s rights activist, and the founder of the American community nursing movement.”

Ms. Wald was born 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.

In 1889, Wald met a young nurse who impressed her so much that she decided to study nursing. She graduated from New York City Hospital and enrolled in medical school. At the same time, she volunteered to provide nursing services to the immigrants and the poor living in New York’s tenements. 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 quit 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 no money and 10 nurses, which increased to 250 nurses and a budget of $600,000 by 1916. Wald and her colleagues visited the poor in their five-story walk-up coldwater flats. They educated residents about personal hygiene. They provided preventive, acute, and long-term health care and later, assistance with housing and employment.

Wald persuaded the New York Board of Education to require that all schools have a nurse on duty during school hours. She persuaded President Theodore Roosevelt to create a Federal Children’s Bureau to protect children from abusive child labor. She lobbied successfully to change the divorce laws so that the abandoned spouse could receive alimony. She helped form the Women’s Trade Union League to protect women from having to work in “sweatshops.”

Wald also 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. She pitched in to do her part as chairman of the Committee on Community Nursing of the American Red Cross. She helped chair the Red Cross campaign to wipe out the influenza epidemic of 1918, and worked to require health inspections in the workplace in order to protect workers.

Another major achievement was persuading Columbia University to appoint the first professor of nursing. Until that time, nursing had been taught in hospitals, and consisted largely of supervised work experience.

In 1922, Wald was named in The New York Times as one of the 12 greatest living American women. In 1936, she 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 and the causes for which she fought. In the 115 years since she gave it birth, the New York VNS has grown from a staff of 10 to 12,000, the revenue from zero to $1 billion a year, and the number of people served increased from 18,000 a year to about 3.5 million a year. During the same time frame, the number of home care community nursing programs has increased from seven to more than 25,000 today.

Wald chose never to marry, but she has millions of progeny today in the form of the home care and hospice nurses, therapists, and aides who were motivated to follow in her footsteps. Significantly, also on March 10, 1982, the National Association for Home Care & Hospice was formed, continuing Wald’s legacy of caring for the sick and dying in their own homes. Wald summarized her beliefs saying, “Nursing is love in action, and there is no finer manifestation of it than the care of the aged and disabled in their own homes.”

The nation should begin plans to celebrate Wald’s 150th birthday on March 10, 2017, with a joint session of Congress. Congress may wish to consider her for the Congressional Medal of Honor, the nation’s highest honor. Actually, it is a happy coincidence that the U.S. in the same year, 2017, will celebrate both the 150th birthday of Lillian Wald and the 200th birthday of Frederick Douglass, the great human rights advocate. We should make the most of this opportunity.