



Remembering Emily Menlo Marks: A Legacy of Advocacy and Support

Michael Zisser August 2023

Recently, I arrived a few minutes early for my lunch with Emily in mid-June at a restaurant on Columbus Ave around the corner from where she lived. The Maître di asked me to wait until my friend arrived before sitting me. At that moment, Emily came walking up the block, the maître di loudly saying, EMILY MARKS, asking me if she was my friend. Hugs ensued, since apparently, he and Emily had a long relationship based on his service at other Upper West Side restaurants. We got the best available table (most of the restaurant was reserved for a party in honor of Earl the Pearl Monroe's grandson graduating from high school). A complimentary appetizer and, after our burgers, a delicious complimentary dessert were provided by Emily's old acquaintance. This was so typical of Emily, knowing everyone in every corner of the City, and more than happy to have someone join us (the Maître di) for much of the meal to share Upper West Side gossip. Most of us have been impressed by the extraordinary range of Emily's friendships, as witnessed by today's gathering, but I think of her, and will remember her, primarily as an institution builder - a believer in the power and traditions of institutions to change the world. At a time when individualism and ego seem to dominate much of our culture, Emily stands out as a person who understood that history relies on institutions and traditions to preserve our best selves. My comments here are therefore as much political as personal, which defined our relationship for so many years.

Emily was appointed the Executive Director of United Neighborhood Houses of New York in early 1988. I became the Executive Director of University Settlement a few months later.



We shared a common understanding of what our roles needed to be, but Emily was far better prepared, experienced and knowledgeable about the real tasks that would lie ahead. As Emily so clearly articulated, all she had to do was to ensure that UNH live up to its own noble history, its own reputation, its own essential institutional place in the non-profit firmament on which the healthy functioning of this City is so dependent. This was no small task given the level of disrepair and crisis which gripped the UNH of that day. But with her numerous friendships, associations, and understanding of non-profit dynamics, she spent 12 years reshaping UNH and building a solid base for the re-emergence of settlements and neighborhood centers as a vital force. This would occur just when too many folks thought settlements were a relic from the past. Emily was a bold choice by the UNH leadership (which included some past Executive Directors no longer with us) but it was a choice that has had incredible impact on our City.

Since I had the same challenge and same aspirations at University Settlement, we partnered on many innovative projects, becoming friends and political comrades along the way.

I can think now so many years later of at least two such projects which I believe the social historians among us should remember. First, several foundations dedicated to the interests of



young children asked Emily if UNH and the settlements wanted to pilot a concept in early childhood education which would combine separately funded and administered programs into one unified model. Day care, head start, family day care would be seen as one program, with all children regarded as deserving equal attention and resources. Emily agreed and UNH led this initiative, understanding that settlements had been conducting early childhood programs since the late 19th century and had been an integral component in every historical early childhood imitative conducted by the public and private sectors. Three settlements participated in that early stage – University Settlement, Hudson Guild and East Side House. Now, 35 years later, the challenge of a unified program still exists but the idea has become a model throughout the country and at every funding level - and widespread in NYC despite the remaining obstacles. This began with Emily and UNH taking a large reputational and programmatic risk.

A second goal, still very much a challenge, was to see New York as a wonderful collection of neighborhoods, representing the full spectrum of economic, social, and demographic diversity. Most importantly, the decentralized provision of services at the neighborhood level – instead of the highly centralized large-scale delivery models espoused by some mayors - became the rallying cry for settlements across the city, with Emily leading the charge. UNH was and is about the strength of neighborhoods, a core guiding principle which transcends parochial interests.

At the end of her UNH tenure, settlements had reclaimed the role and reputation they historically earned and deserved. Memory became future focused. UNH has continued to thrive after Emily's tenure ended, under the excellent successive leadership of Nancy Wachstein, followed by Susan Stamler. For all those who felt or argued that the settlement era was over, they were wrong!!



There are more members now than ever before, more neighborhoods represented, more fights for social justice. Emily reinforced this movement, and other leaders have kept up the struggle.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention one other important “Emily” accomplishment. In the same way that UNH needed revitalization, so did the International Federation of Settlements. Many of you might be unaware that the settlement movement actually spread around the world beginning at the end of the 19th century in London and continuing in NYC and many other countries through today. When IFS needed an energetic boost, Emily accepted the role of President of the IFS and served two terms. She remained in New York but just added this to her long list of responsibilities. Funding was secured to have a full-time staff member based in London. So again, another institution needed rebuilding, and this time IFS was reset on a course to fulfill its international role. With Emily at the helm, many NYC settlements became more actively involved in joining IFS. Today, there are many settlement house leaders actively engaged with international issues, and I hope they remember that the initial energy for this engagement came from her.

I especially recall, quite vividly, our IFS trip to Israel many years ago. The highlight was visiting the many centers which served Arab and Israeli populations together – a fulfillment of the neighborhood house tradition of social equality. We also had the opportunity to travel through Jordan for a few days, culminating with a visit to the ancient site of Petra. The traditional way to enter Petra is by riding a pony through the narrow passageway with steep walls leading to the grand opening vista into the old world, a scene made famous in the “Raiders of the Lost Ark”. I rode next to Emily; I was very nervous, meaning completely intimidated by the experience. She



was calm and collected, as always, smiling and laughing all the way. Riding into Petra did not compare to the challenges Emily had been facing back in New York, but she succeeded in her quest with her characteristic indomitable spirit.