

David Garza

In this issue of *Exhibition*, editor Ellen Snyder-Grenier speaks with David Garza, President & CEO of Henry Street Settlement, to learn how his work as the head of a social service agency on New York City's Lower East Side – addressing issues surrounding poverty – might help us think in new ways about bridging divides.



David Garza is President & CEO of Henry Street Settlement, the 125-year-old Lower East Side social service, arts, and health care organization serving more than 50,000 community members each year. Appointed director in 2010, Garza – a longtime advocate for expanding employment opportunities, fair and affordable housing, and strong and healthy families – had previously led the agency's Workforce Development Center. David is a graduate of Harvard College and the Institute for Not-for-Profit Management at Columbia Business School. He serves on the boards of the Betances Health Center, Citizens Committee for Children, Human Services Council, New York City Employment and Training Coalition, and United Neighborhood Houses. He is also a member of the New York City Regional Economic Development Council. In 2018 David was named by City & State New York to the inaugural Nonprofit Power 50 list.

Q Ellen Could you tell us a little bit about Henry Street Settlement and the issues you face on a daily basis?

A David Henry Street was founded in a vibrant but impoverished Lower East Side in 1893. Lillian Wald, our founder – then a 26-year-old nurse – settled in the neighborhood to help address her neighbors' most pressing challenges. The issues that our community faces today are pretty much identical to the issues we faced then: access to quality healthcare; the need for safe and affordable housing; quality of education for our children and families; employment – access to living-wage jobs – and services to immigrants and their families.

Our goal is to seek out and have an impact on some of the most intractable social issues of our day. We do that through 17 sites on the Lower East Side where we provide services in four major areas: education and employment; health and wellness; transitional and supportive housing; and performing and visual art.

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Q Your founder, Lillian Wald, believed in what she called the necessity of “association,” of stepping across the social divides of industrial America to connect with those who were marginalized or merely different. How does this power of connection play out in the Settlement’s work today?

A I think whenever you reflect on humanity at its best self, it involves the collective, it involves the community, it involves a family in many senses of the word. While it’s about individual opportunity and freedom, I think that the richness of the human experience comes from our relationship to others. It’s at the core of the strongest human emotions: love, compassion, empathy. It’s about how we relate to others in the world. Settlements, and Henry Street in particular, have always had the privilege of strengthening communities by connecting people to each other.

Q You talk about the absolute necessity of having to be in a community, listening, talking, in order to understand what people need and want – and then taking meaningful action by “resourcing” it. What do you mean by that?

A It’s critically important to listen to the community we serve in order to respond with services. We really have doubled down on this. This generation’s issues include economic development, gentrification, and volatile financial shifts in the city’s landscape. At times in past years, our capacity to listen was diminished and inhibited, I think, by how challenging it is to run an organization in this day and age. My observation was that it was really important that we put the street back in Henry Street. From that somewhat visionary observation came a series of activities and a sustained commitment, coupled with one of my management tenets: I believe that if you don’t resource a function – if you don’t put dollars and staff behind it – you don’t get it.

There can be forums to pick up information from the community, but, it’s important that you support a mechanism in the organization to do just that. Through our acknowledgement that we needed to put the street back in Henry Street, we hired someone to oversee community engagement and public policy. We hired two additional staff members to report to them. And we started holding regular and consistent focus groups, forums, and town halls to listen to the people we were serving, as well as to the public in general, people who were not necessarily enrolled in our programs. We’ve held these types of forums consistently for the last five years plus.

We also formalized our process. First, we listen to what’s happening on the street. Then we reflect, analyze, organize, and prioritize the information. We produce (and widely share) a book about community issues and distill it into the most salient actionable points. Then, we take action. We respond with a program or a program change, or convert it to budget advocacy, or to policy, mostly on a city level. In short: listen, reflect, act.

Q Your work takes you into many different worlds and you do it with ease. Especially in our divided times, exhibition-makers aspire to bridge divides and connect with our communities in meaningful ways. Usually, that starts with a conversation. What suggestions do you have for someone who wants to start a productive dialogue with someone who is different than them?

A I think the most critical piece of it is to listen – and to figure out how to not try to figure it out. You need to be as viscerally present and in the moment as possible, because that lays the very necessary fertile ground for human connection. I think that people sometimes go into conversations over-intellectualizing their own objectives. Or sometimes they’re looking for specific answers to specific questions. That can accelerate right past the human connection. Stop; be present; and do whatever you can, at the most fundamentally respectful level, to be human together.