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Finding a Common Thread

Ruth Taube, 95, has taught sewing for a half-century on the Lower East Side

By CHARLES PASSY

When Ruth Taube is in need of a scrap of fabric for a sewing project, be it a bit of lace or a stretch of something in a colorful pattern, she doesn't have to look far.

The shelves of her "office," a community basement room in a Lower East Side affordable-housing development where she teaches the time-honored craft of working with needle and thread, are bulging with many such remnants. After all, Ms. Taube belongs to a generation that believes in letting nothing go to waste.

"We're holders on," she said during a recent class.

At the remarkable age of 95, Ms. Taube makes such pronouncements with a swagger fully earned. She is a Lower East Side native who not only never left the neighborhood, she has also spent the last half-century working for the Henry Street Settlement, the nonprofit social-service agency behind her sewing program.

While few people these days have the skill or patience to fix a zipper or let out a skirt, Ms. Taube, a diminutive dynamo of a woman with a neatly coiffed head of white hair, still believes in the importance of knowing how to sew. She also believes in the value of honest labor and being a dedicated employee.

"I get paid for three hours, but I work four," she said of her Henry Street Settlement class, which she holds twice a week. She makes the 10-minute walk from her Lower East Side apartment to the program's location on her own.

It is less a class in a rigidly structured sense and more a sewing circle for beginners and pros alike, with Ms. Taube at the center of the proceedings. By the veteran instructor's estimate, she has had at least 5,000



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Ruth Taube advised Ann Hess on a throw-pillow-making project at the Henry Street Settlement.

people come through the program, which is offered at no charge.

On a recent weekday, her students, mostly older women from the neighborhood, were deep into a host of projects.

Deborah Smith, 60 years old, came in to bring new life to a tattered dress. Ms. Taube suggested adding some lace to "give it some oomph."

Ann Hess, 63, was hoping to make a stylish set of throw pillows, replete with corded trim. As Ms. Taube started mapping out the steps, she noted that "you can get a pillow for \$5, but you're not getting corded."

But dress alterations and throw pillows are small stuff compared with other projects Ms. Taube has tackled with students. Among the most ambitious: three bridal gowns.

While the Lower East Side has become a trendy neighborhood in recent years, it still is home to those on tight or fixed incomes, Ms. Taube noted. Hence, the continued need for a sewing class as a budget-saving option.

Plus, not all women can easily buy their clothes off the rack, Ms. Taube said.

"The styling is for girls who are 6-foot-1 and shaped like a broomstick."

Ms. Taube isn't even the oldest one on hand at her program. Victoria Cammarota, a longtime regular, is 97.

For those on tight or fixed incomes, a sewing class is a budget-saving option.

Ms. Cammarota knows her way around a sewing machine, and Ms. Taube has about a dozen available for her students to use. But Ms. Cammarota still defers to her teacher for advice.

"She has a lot of patience," she said of Ms. Taube.

And Ms. Taube leads by example. She still makes most of her own clothing and also tailors the occasional item for her family, in-

cluding her daughter, two grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

"All the kids know if they get a hole or something rips they call Grandma Ruth," said Hesta Fortgang, Ms. Taube's daughter.

When Ms. Taube, who is widowed, first came to Henry Street in the 1960s, the sewing program was part of a much larger one devoted to various skills, from woodworking to shoemaking.

Over time, only the sewing has survived. And even that hasn't been a guarantee: On more than one occasion, Ms. Taube says her class has nearly been axed.

Today, David Garza, the organization's executive director, talks up the class with enthusiasm. It may constitute a very small part of the organization's \$43 million budget, but it has a valued place, Mr. Garza said.

Ms. Taube herself is enshrined as a fixture at both the institution and the neighborhood it serves, he added.

"She stands out as an example to all of us," he said.