

100 Today, She Remembers: 'We Sewed, We Talked'

Ruth Taube taught sewing at the Henry Street Settlement on the Lower East Side for more than 60 years.

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Good morning. It's Wednesday. We'll meet a woman who taught sewing on the Lower East Side for much of her life — and she is 100 years old today.



Ruth Taube, center, with Andres Biel, left. Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

There is a through line of serendipity and self-sufficiency from Taube to Andres Biel, who has taken over Taube's studio and started a fashion workshop for low-income teenagers. Biel wandered in one day in 2009.

A decade later, as he was heading into his 30s, he returned to what Taube had introduced him to. He started his own brand, IFlyUniverse, and won the emerging designer award at Harlem Fashion Week in 2019.

Her story

Taube said she started sewing when she was 2 years old. Her mother made a dress for her porcelain baby doll. Taube herself then sewed a pillow for the doll. "From there," she said, "I started to make little things for myself."

But sewing remained a passion that dovetailed with financial necessity until she was an adult. "I had a very good friend who called me on the phone and said, 'Listen, Henry Street Settlement has a sewing class,'" Taube recalled. "'The teacher could not make it, and a whole bunch of little girls are waiting for the class to start. Would you go over there and pitch in for the teacher?'"

Taube went. "I had nothing to lose. It was a few blocks from my house," she said. "That was it. From that day on, I had a class at Henry Street Settlement."

She also had the challenges that came with what was a teaching job: lesson planning. "I didn't have a curriculum, so I had all week to think up a small project they could start at 3:30 and finish by 5:30," she said.

In time, her sessions became part of a long-running home-planning workshop for adults. And Taube made it clear that she taught more than just how to make a dress or a suit with fabric that drapes well.

"I had a table, and we sat around that table," she said. "We sewed, we talked. Whatever your heart needed, you said at that table, and your heart got back opinions and ideas. People coming in with a lot of unhappy feelings walked out with very good feelings."

Or with very carefully made clothes. "We made a few wedding gowns for girls who couldn't afford fancy wedding gowns, and gowns for the mothers and grandmothers who would be attending the weddings," Taube said.

Ruth Taube has learned to live with the double takes at the doctor's office.

"She always has young people there working with her, studying to be future doctors," Taube said. "Some of them, when they say 'what is your birthday,' I say 8-2-1923. They don't know what '19' means."

So yes, she is 100 today. But this isn't only about a milestone in the life of a woman with no-nonsense, can-do energy. It's also about someone who at 35 picked up what she did for nearly two-thirds of her life. That was teaching sewing for the Henry Street Settlement, the nonprofit on the Lower East Side that now runs more than 50 programs, including the largest Meals on Wheels operation in Manhattan, four homeless shelters and a work force development center.

His story

Biel credits Taube with being “the first to open my eyes with sewing.” He had been an intern in a Henry Street program when he was introduced to Taube by a counselor who knew that he had an interest in fashion design.

Taube “doesn’t play games,” he said. “She sits you down, and you do it together.” Biel said he learned “the basic skills of being able to make something — make something from scratch.” A tote bag, he said.

He was the youngest person in Taube’s studio that first day, and the only man. “Sewing, people look at it as so feminizing,” he said. “It’s not. It’s really for everyone. In a factory, men operate these machines, so what’s the difference if they do it at home?”

Biel’s program is called Rambler Studio, after a street-fashion program that began in Amsterdam. He said his particular focus was on “building with younger creative individuals who are growing with fashion,” and as he talked, they showed off their work — jackets and tops with a touch of the Roaring Twenties look.

Which was, of course, the decade in which Taube was born.

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