

THE ELEANOR AND ANNA ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

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Description: In this segment, ER interviews Claire Towsly, director of Public Interest of the New York Community Service Society.

Participants: Eleanor Roosevelt, Claire Towsly

[ER:] Thank you, Anna. This morning we're going to hear about a national hook-up, not radio, but a coast-to-coast network of social service to the families of our country who have been overtaken by trouble. I've asked Miss Claire Towsly, director of Public Interest of the New York Community Service Society to tell us about this. But first, Miss Towsly, how did you yourself get interested in social work? [Claire Towsly:] Well, it was a long time ago, Mrs. Roosevelt. I had just left Oberlin College with three of my fellow graduates and we went out to a middle-western state where we had jobs offered to us in a state institution for dependent children. Now these were youngsters who had been taken away from their families by the children's courts of the state, and they were a pretty troubled uh unhappy lot. I uh taught the first grade and I found that not the three 'R's but uh really, giving them a little pleasure and a little happiness was the first thing on the books. And so I and my three college friends started in. Very early I noticed a boy in my class, Jerry, who was about nine years old, uh who uh was a darling. About a week later he came to me and he said with shining eyes, "I'm going to a new home, I'm gonna have a new mother, I'm adopted." Well I felt a lump in my throat because I hated to have him go in one sense and in another it was a wonderful thing for him. And so I kissed him goodbye and away he went. And I missed him.

Well, three months after that, one morning looking over that hillside, I saw Jerry trudging back with his little suitcase with his head down, and I said to my friend, "here comes Jerry, something must have gone wrong." He came over to the class and sat in his usual seat, but for two weeks I couldn't get a word out of him. He had his head down; he wouldn't look to the right nor the left. And finally, in desperation, one night I said, "Jerry, since you've been gone we've had a mouse and he's been eating up the erasers. Now I wonder if you would help me. Don't you want to stay after school and see if you can't catch him in your cap?" And so, a little diffidently, he stayed, and sir, thank heavens the mouse came out of the hole. And Jerry made a dab at it with his cap and caught him and he said excitedly, "What'll I do with him?" And I said, "Well, run out to the corn field and drop him and let him go free." So he did that and he came back in, and I said "Jerry, come over here a second." And so he stood beside me and I put my arm around him, and I said, "Honey, what's the matter? Won't you tell me what went wrong?" It took him several minutes, his little lip quivered and finally he put his head down, he said, "She didn't want me." Well, that just about broke my heart, Mrs. Roosevelt, a dear little boy to have an experience like that. And I made up my mind, there must be some better way of doing this work of social work and adoption and so on, a more skilled way, if you will. And so that's how I happened to come to New York to take my training at the New York School of Social Work which is still conducted by my own society as a graduate school of Columbia University.

[ER:] That's a very revealing human interest story, Miss Towsly. And now that I know how you yourself began in social work, tell me how it was your organization began, for I like this once upon a time way of getting at things.

[Claire Towsly:] Well as you know, Mrs. Roosevelt, the Community Service Society has just had its one hundred and first birthday. It began down near where you live, on Washington Square. 101 years ago on a cold winter night. A very fine man by the name of Robert Hartley who lived down there, called a dozen

friends to his fireside one night and he said to them that he was ashamed the way he was not carrying out his citizen responsibilities. Here there was want in every hand, people coming up to him, and he was sure they were all handling it in a haphazard fashion. And so he said to his friends, "I make a proposal, let us all put some money in the kitty and let this form an organization-- somebody to be on the job from morning 'til night, and we'll have the comforting feeling that if we send someone in there'll always be someone there to help them and help them in the right way." And so it was uh Mrs. Roosevelt that the CSS was born 101 years ago on that cold winter night.

[ER:] And how large was the organization that year as compared to today? (4:46)

[Claire Towsly:] Well, in that year, in 1848, it had a staff of one. And today the society has a staff of over six hundred, and last year it served twenty-eight thousand families here. Really a fair sized town.

[ER:] My! With such big responsibilities here in our own city, how does the Community Service Society manage to do this long distance social work too, and just what is it that it does?

[Claire Towsly:] Well uh there are about something like two hundred and forty uh family agencies like our own all over the country, and we constantly use each other to help people out of trouble. Here's a good instance, uh young Mr. Roberts, on a new job out in a western city not long ago got a telegram one day from his wife. Now he'd been planning to bring his wife and baby on there, for this was his first good job. His wife was back in New York City. But the telegram said, "Come at once. Baby very ill. Come home." So he went to his plant personnel office and they in turn turned to our family agency out on the west coast who wired us, we saw the hospital, the mother and the baby, and found that she was in a panic over really uh a rather small matter and the baby was getting well so we wired back and he kept his job.

[ER:] I wish we had time to hear about all the different things you do, particularly I'd like to know about homeless boys, but we haven't today. Perhaps that means we'll have to have another session and ask you more another day. Thank you so much for being with us, Miss Towsly. And now, back to my daughter Anna in Hollywood.

(6:30)

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