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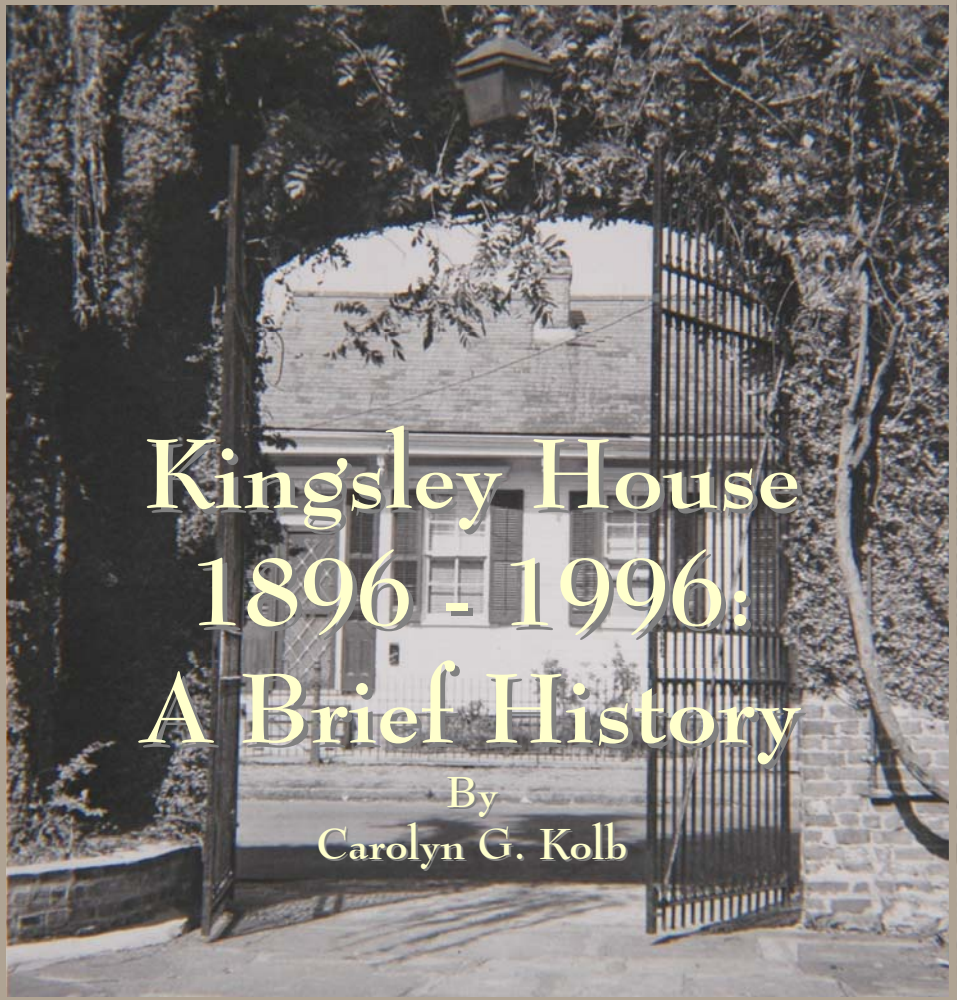
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Kingsley House 1896 - 1996: A Brief History

By
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“Kingsley House is a rock in the sands of change... It tells its constituency... that it is here, that their problems are its problems, that their hopes and aspirations can be achieved by social efforts—by a community of interest encouraged by and through Kingsley House.”

—Joseph Friend
President of the Board Kingsley House
March 31, 1971

Teeth brushed, hands held, tears dried, meals fed, happy times passed, lessons learned, problems solved, sorrows shared—what has been going on at Kingsley House for the past hundred years is simple, human kindness: the things that good-hearted neighbors do for each other. The story of Kingsley House is a story of many kind and brave people who daily overcome odds to help each other and to help themselves be better human beings. It is, overall, a happy story. There is good beginning, lots of interesting characters and events, and fortunately there is no end in sight!

A century ago this year the idea for Kingsley House was put forth by a clergyman, Dr. Beverley Warner of Trinity Episcopal Church on Jackson Avenue. The women and men who made this dream a reality, most importantly Eleanor McMain, would be called social workers today, but when Kingsley House began there was no such term.

As an early example of the settlement house movement in America (and the oldest continuously existing one in the south) Kingsley House has originated many things:

- The Tulane School of Social Work had its beginnings in Kingsley House programs
- The Lighthouse for the Blind evolved from Kingsley House services
- The New Orleans Recreation Department is a descendant of the earliest public playgrounds and sports programs that Kingsley House pioneered

In addition, Kingsley House fought for child labor laws, better health care and housing conditions, and led the way for New Orleans non-profit agencies to work with federal funding on programs to solve community problems. Kingsley House follows a pattern of working with people, not just for them—and that includes everyone for the neighborhood children in the Headstart program to the board members of the United Way (of which Kingsley House is a long time member agency.) In all its relationships, Kingsley House is a partner, and that is a tradition that goes to the very heart of how Kingsley House began.

The “settlement house” movement started in Victorian England. The industrialization of the thriving nineteenth century, and the dreadful urban poverty accompanying it, roused the British clergy and universities to action. Just as the Peace Corps drew young Americans in this century, so the Toynbee Hall residence in the slums of London attracted Oxford and Cambridge students to live and work with the poor.

Toynbee Hall was a sort of mission. In a substantial building located in a needy community, idealistic young volunteers lived among the poor. There they would be neighbors, and they could help the local residents both by setting an example and by giving direct aid and teaching skills. The residence itself would be a community center, a place not only for aid, but for classes and meetings and recreation. Meanwhile, the young residents’ own lifestyle and the massive building itself could be both example and haven from the realities of urban poverty.

One of the articulate young Englishmen who strongly supported this program was the author Charles Kingsley. Best known for his children’s book, the allegory “The Water Babies” about the dreamlike adventures of a chimney sweep, Kingsley’s writings were one way in which this benevolent movement spread.

The settlement house would sprout in Chicago as Jane Addams’ Hull House, and in New York as the Henry Street Settlement. In New Orleans the idea came from the Rev. Beverley Warner.

Beverley Warner was a graduate of Princeton and a native of New Jersey. Besides his seminary training, Warner was himself an author. His 1885 novel “Troubled Waters” (in which an evil factory owner cheats a pious widow and her daughter—happily the women triumph in the end) showed his deep concern for working poor.

“There is a trinity of problems... for present and future generations of this republic to deal with. The problem of labor, the problem poverty, the problem of wealth. They so touch upon and influence our intercourse with each other, that he is a foolish prophet who does not recognize the fact and allow for it.”

“Troubled Waters” by Beverley Warner

At the close of his novel, Warner advocated the use of wealth to help the poor improve their lot while keeping their self respect. When he and his family came in 1893 to Trinity Church, he saw in the nearby neighborhood a need for action.

That area of New Orleans near the river and a few blocks above Canal Street (the Irish Channel or Lower Garden District) had badly

deteriorated by the 1890's. Immigrants, both Irish and German, had long settled there. Dotted between warehouses and commercial buildings, some decayed mansions from earlier in the century remained, smaller rental housing was crowded, streets were muddy and few households had running water. (Ironically, in the 1830's this neighborhood was the location of the New Orleans Water Works, with a huge reservoir on St. Thomas and Religious Streets. Cotton presses and other industries needing steam power located nearby, the area became primarily commercial, and eventually only families with no other affordable choice would live there.)

The Trinity congregation was ready to offer assistance. The church soon had "woodlot" – a place where unemployed men could find work cutting lumber into firewood. A reading room was opened, a free dispensary for food and medicines went into operation. Trinity volunteers were eager to help neighborhood children and young people form clubs for social activities and self improvement.

The idea that early schooling could "build character" was important to those concerned with social problems in late 1800's, and the free kindergarten movement was willingly accepted in New Orleans. Trinity was supportive of the efforts of the Episcopal Diocese to run a free kindergarten for needy neighborhood children and it was soon recognized that special training was needed for the kindergarten teachers. Katherine Hardy, who had received her teacher training in Louisville, Kentucky, came to set up the New Orleans training program and work with the Episcopal-sponsored kindergarten. She was welcomed, as the needs of the children were great.

New Orleans in the 1890's was a city of contrasts. The city's architecture and its gardens could be incredibly lovely. (Katherine Hardy, a talented amateur photographer, made a special effort to photograph historic buildings and parks as well as record her working environment.) Those same stately residences, when located too near busy factories and wharves, easily became dark tenements. In this neighborhood there were only dusty or muddy streets for children to play in, parents who might work long factory shifts or not work at all, and no amusement places other than corner saloons.

Near St. Mary's Market (in an area just downtown from the Crescent City Connection bridge) the Diocesan Free Kindergarten was serving the youngest children. This kindergarten at 928 Tchoupitoulas at Howard Avenue, under volunteer leadership of Mrs. J. L. Harris (also the building's owner), was soon to move to another location. This created a unique opportunity.

What better place than 928 Tchoupitoulas for New Orleans' own Toynbee Hall? The neighborhood already knew the building as a center for activities. Clubs were already meeting in this familiar kindergarten location.

The Rev. Warner who first conceived the idea of creating a local settlement, then decided on the name "Kingsley House." This had a double significance for him: his three year old son, Kingsley Warner, had died. And, Charles Kingsley's own writings in support of active work among the poor were much in Beverley Warner's mind. Kingsley House it would be.

The lease began July 1, 1896. Katherine Hardy would head a group of five young women residents: herself, Margaret Leonard, Harriet Barton, Amelia Schriver, and May Wilson. Each brought a special talent: Harriet Barton was in charge of housekeeping. May Wilson was a kindergarten teacher, as was Margaret Leonard (who also wrote plays and had a flair for the dramatic.) Amelia Schriever was a musician. The five young women were joined by Harriet Barton's invalid mother (who contributed the furnishings.) Kingsley House would remain at that address until October 10, 1900. Then, again moving into a location just vacated by the free kindergarten (which was expanding), the settlement house moved to 1202 Annunciation Street.

This substantial wooden home, typical of many once fine 19th century residences in the city, was well suited to its new use. The original group of women changed as some left and new ones arrived, but there was space enough so that all residents could have their rooms upstairs, and the first floor could be given over to activities. There was a yard, and next door a smaller house that would become the New Orleans Day Nursery. One attraction the house held for the neighbors was that it had a functioning faucet – and that gate was not locked for those whose cisterns had run dry and who had no plumbing.

Kingsley House might function as an institution with helpful activities for its surrounding community, but it was well known as a center for fun and good times. The first thing the young ladies did was give a neighborhood party. Amelia Schriever played the piano, there was singing and dancing. Was this a frivolous response in the face of such desperate need? Or might this be just a very human way of relieving suffering? Half a century later one of the neighborhood children remembered: "They taught us that gracious living did not depend upon money. They taught us to ... take pleasure in the simple things of life." This same good-humored approach—understanding that providing happy times can be as important as solving a problem – is still part of the Kingsley House way.

A pattern was set. The neighborhood welcomed a place for their children to safely spend time. Soon the other activities—clubs for boys and girls, a mothers' club, sewing and music lessons, a lending library —attracted more participants. People in the neighborhood began to rely on Kingsley House for help in time of need or troubled. At the same time, Kingsley House would insist on certain rules, in fact, those participating were often asked to pay dues:

10 cents a year, for example. In this way the neighbors understood that Kingsley House was not to be taken for granted, but was there for their benefits, if they would only take advantage of what was offered.

Katherine Hardy soon went home to Louisville to marry. Eleanor McMMain, already living in the house by this time, replaced her as head resident. Raised in Baton Rouge, Eleanor McMMain was an active Episcopalian and recently trained kindergarten teacher. She soon paid a visit to Chicago to observe Jane Addams' Hull House and spend some time studying the new discipline that would soon be called "Social Work." Kingsley House would always encourage the best new ideas, and even in the earliest years Eleanor McMMain made sure her settlement house offered programs comparable to any in the country. In the years to come under her direction, Kingsley House became a New Orleans institution and she herself would gain fame as a social activist and as one of the preeminent Social Workers in America.

Seeing Kingsley House as part of the wider community, Eleanor McMMain quickly helped guide it into becoming a non-sectarian community service organization, with an ecumenical board.

On November 18, 1902, the charter of the Kingsley House Association was signed with the Rev. Beverley Warner as president, and Rabbi I.L. Leucht of Touro Synagogue as vice president. The organization's stated purpose would be "to make easy and clear the way of right-living, in every sense that touches life, thought, feeling and action and to that end to establish in the City of New Orleans such communities of persons... to put into practical effect and efficient operation the best system of spreading such knowledge of right-living, and the bettering of those conditions which form and mold manhood and womanhood and develop the best interests of American citizenship."

This would be interpreted as a mandate to improve the lot of New Orleans citizens in a variety of creative ways. Kingsley House staff and members would canvass housing to determine in what conditions people lived. They would gather facts about tuberculosis and help form the Anti-Tuberculosis League. Doctors came to Kingsley House for free clinics, dentists provided checks-ups. Kingsley House maintained a kindergarten until the public schools offered one, and Kingsley House would hold summer school before this too was publicly sponsored. Even on the Kingsley House playground the rules of fair play were enforced, and this no doubt had a ripple effect. The "gangs" of the St. Mary's Market area greatly curtailed their operations. Kingsley House helped pass a child labor law, helped wipe out yellow fever by spearheading efforts to screen windows and cisterns, and meanwhile offered classes in trades

and general education in the evenings, besides supporting numerous clubs, weekly dances, dramatics and musical performances. It was an ambitious program, but under Eleanor McMMain's capable hands it thrived.

One project especially dear to her heart was Camp Onward. A group of girls, the Doorstep Club, decided they would work to earn money for a summer outing. The idea grew, a suitable residence was found in Lewisburg near Mandeville, and the Kingsley House summer camp began in 1907. This first camp was frighteningly almost destroyed by a hurricane—Miss McMMain would take a long time to recover from her experience guiding the children and staff through flood waters to safety (and the event would provide the plot for a popular Kingsley House play, "Fernando," about the boy who fetched a skiff for the stranded campers). By 1909 the camp had moved to Bay St. Louis, Mississippi.

Camp Onward was well named. "Onward," which might be called the Kingsley House motto, was taken from a verse in a hymn (Number 533 in the Episcopal Hymnal of 1916) the boys' clubs liked to sing: "We march, we march to Victory!" was the title of this rousing anthem, "Onward we march!" being the preferred line. Kingsley House would often use the term "Onward City" to refer to the fellowship of campers, or to the total membership using the facilities, and "The Onward" was a name given to publications through the years.

Almost a quarter of a century after Eleanor McMMain became head resident, Kingsley House received a donation of the square of land at Richard and Constance Streets, and the brick buildings located there. Lumberman Frank B. Williams was the generous donor, and he also contributed \$300,000 toward construction costs. Eleanor McMMain, interviewed in the *New Orleans Item* on April 6, 1924, had said the aim of her beloved Kingsley House was "to give to the whole neighborhood a place where happiness and good will grow in the sunshine of larger neighborhood contacts to the enrichment and beautifying of life." In the new location, open for activities May 1, 1925, Miss McMMain could realize her most ambitious plans. She happily accepted the donation of the buildings (Williams had already been a generous benefactor) and set about organizing new programs to fill them.

The plan for the complex was unique. In an early New Orleans example of adaptive use of extant structures, Kingsley House incorporated the 1830's era cotton press buildings (parts of which remain today). The other buildings, designed by Favrot and Livaudais, Ltd., were constructed of brick, two story with galleries in form traditional to the area. The spacious center courtyard would be sodded and trees were planted, each Kingsley House club taking responsibility for one tree.

A wading pool was added, later to be joined by a swimming pool. The gym was filled with athletes, the printing shop and electrical shop set about training pupils. Plays and dance performances filled the stage, and in later years the artist Paul Ninas would depict Kingsley House's past in a wall mural (today a new mural by the Y.A. - Y.A. group brightens the outside wall by the Headstart Center). All told, the new Kingsley House location was so perfect that even her trip to France in 1924 to help start a settlement house there could not compare to the excitement Miss McMMain felt on opening the new gates to the public. And, for the rest of her life, this was her home.

After decades of leadership, Eleanor McMMain died in 1934, much mourned by her community. At her funeral there were two sets of pall bearers: one of community leaders, one of boys from the Kingsley House athletic teams.

Kingsley House continued under direction of Helen Pearce and Elizabeth Woods. Miss Woods had first begun as a kindergarten teacher in 1904, retiring in 1941. Helen Pearce, a Social Worker, had come in 1931 when Miss McMMain's health was failing. Warren Kearny, Kingsley House president since 1914, noted when she left in 1941 that Helen Pearce "endeared herself to the men and women forming the constituency of Kingsley House in a way that is second only to that of Miss McMMain."

Kingsley House had continued its programs during the 1930's offering clubs and activities as well as much needed assistance in the Depression years. But the board realized that changes would be necessary. The St. Thomas Housing Project, an early urban renewal project set to open in the 1940's, would relocate many residents, and newcomers would arrive. To get ready for the future, the Kingsley House Board commissioned a 1940 report on the organization from the associate general secretary of the national Y.M.C.A., Roy Sorenson. Sorenson's report urged a more intensive program for a wider community, and suggested that the National Federation of Settlements, Inc., could help find a new executive.

When a list of suggested applicants arrived, the one given the longest appraisal was an energetic staff member from the Henry Street Settlement in New York. Emeric Kurtagh was Hungarian immigrant, held a Master's Degree in Education from Columbia University, and was gifted in music.

On his first visit, Kurtagh was immediately taken with Kingsley House. "The plant is the most beautiful one I have seen anywhere," he wrote urging a friend to join his staff. "I wish I could send you a railroad ticket to enable you to see this place. That is how they got me. I came here in May and just could not refuse the job."

Kurtagh initiated programs in conjunction with new St. Thomas

Housing Project, began having students from the Tulane University School of Social Work do group work at Kingsley House, and became active in the wider community. The New Orleans Day Nursery merged with Kingsley House in 1942 and this pioneer in day care became a valued program. World War II saw Kingsley House open its doors to servicemen, offering lodging, Sunday morning breakfasts, and regular dances. The range of programs continued, and to have wider representation, neighborhood residents were added to the board in 1944. Kingsley House celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1946 with a special musical play, "The House in the Channel" and numerous events.

In one innovative move, in 1946-49 Kingsley House operated an extension recreation program for a textile union at the Lane Cotton Mills, the first effort in the city to offer a program for both African-American and white children in the same location. By the time Kurtagh left in 1949 Kingsley House was serving more people, with a wider range of both assistance and enrichment programs. Kurtagh was replaced by Nancy Evans, a Social Worker who had been on the staff some six years.

Nancy Evans continued the close allegiance with social work schools, and students would often live at Kingsley House while they worked there. Miss Evans also oversaw changing the nursery school from a morning only schedule for neighborhood children to a program to better serve working parents. Margaret LeBlanc, with the nursery school from 1950 to 1985, lived with her husband and son at Kingsley House and fondly remembers Nancy Evans: "She was a wonderful person. She was always there for you."

The United Fund (later United Way) was organized in 1952 and Kingsley House from the first played and active part in this important community effort of organized giving and shared aims. Some things did not change. As Nancy Evans noted in her message in the April 8, 1956, 60th Anniversary Program: "our basic purposes have been to help boys and girls, men and women realize their best potentialities, to practice democratic living, to foster the spirit of helpfulness to others." In the 1950's Kingsley House opened an extension program in the St. Thomas Housing Project, organizing and then working closely with the St. Thomas Neighborhood Council, helping its neighbors define their own needs, and then assisting them to find ways to meet them. This close work with the neighborhood would result in a smoother transition through the 1960's than might have been expected: when many public swimming pools were closed during this era, the Kingsley House pool was declared open for all.

Named head resident in 1965, John Wall guided Kingsley House's successful efforts to find federal funding through grant programs for neighborhood needs. "That first major grant—I remember when the telegram came.

We had a big bonfire and all the neighbors came. We really celebrated,” Wall recalls. In fact, Kingsley House would be a leader in this new method of government funding. The War on Poverty—the official federal agenda for massive aid combined with assurance that those assisted would take part in the planning and execution of programs—meshed easily with Kingsley House’s own plans. As John Wall explains, Kingsley House always aims to “involve its neighbors in what they are doing, not just let them be the recipients.”

A former chief parole officer who had taught at the Tulane School of Social Work, Wall developed a “training center concept” where social work students got field experience at Kingsley House. During his years there Kingsley house opened all of its programs to all its neighbors. Integration was achieved, and in a show of community support for Kingsley House, in 1967-71 a \$750,000 capital fund drive resulted in renovations for the complex, including additions connecting buildings and a new facility for young children.

In the many years that Kingsley House has been in operation there has been a tradition of long-time staff members. Eleanor McMain, Elizabeth Woods, Comptroller Vera Berndt, Margaret LeBlanc (whose husband Ernie and son Larry also resided at Kingsley House) and many others remained there for three or more decades. Elizabeth “Libby” Milton came to Kingsley House in the 1960’s to take charge of bringing Camp Onward up to the standards of the American Camping Association. That accomplished, she managed summer and recreational activities and currently serves as facilities and support manager. What is special about working at Kingsley House? “A feeling of freedom, freedom to create and do, as a staff—the ability to create and set up programs, and not be stifled,” Ms. Milton explains. “You can see this and feel this—the kids pick up a sense that somebody her cares about them, they feel that the staff is truly interested in them.”

When Michael Moreau assumed the directorship of Kingsley House in 1987, he had a long, happy tradition to follow. Always innovative, he oversaw expansion of programs for family preservation, a focal point for much Kingsley House’s work today. Moreau has an experienced staff, and good volunteers to rely on, not the least of which are the active members of the Kingsley House Board. This is not a board that dozes through meetings: this board works, and Kingsley House welcomes its members’ participation in its bustling atmosphere. The many current programs include Preschool Head Start, Before and After School Day Care, Summer Camp, Teen Activities, Parent/Child Center, Family Preservation and Family Support, Crisis Intervention Services, Family Child Care Network and Adult Day Health Care. Other organizations such as Children’s Hospital have located services at Kingsley House.

Other programs include a family planning and teen pregnancy prevention program. All serve current neighborhood and metropolitan area needs, for Kingsley House is not limited to its immediate vicinity for its service area. Violence and crime, drugs, AIDS—all the problems of urban America are the problems of Kingsley House. Problems may change, but people still suffer. All told, Kingsley House has served over half a million people through the years.

Building Capacity

“It is the purpose of Kingsley House to increase the capacity of persons of all ages, their families, and their communities to overcome personal, institutional, and social obstacles and to increase their capacity to generate the personal, economic and social resources needed to help reach their potential and enhance the quality of their lives.”

*Purpose Statement
Kingsley House, 1996*

Appropriately enough, while looking back on a rich history of public service, Kingsley House celebrates its centennial by launching a \$4.25 million capital project to revitalize its 55,000 square foot physical plant, add 15,000 square feet of space, and upgrade its facilities to contemporary standards.

The decision to remain in its longtime location was carefully considered and heartily endorsed by the Kingsley House board, continuing the organization’s tradition of allegiance to its neighborhood and to adaptive use of existing structures.

That Kingsley House still succeeds in its original aims of helping its neighbors is evidenced by the 1994 Urban Land Institute study of the area which targeted it as “the institutional heart of the neighborhood.” In a unique way, the physical presence of Kingsley House is as important as the humanitarian and educational programs offered there.

Inside the walls of the three acre Kingsley House complex, surrounded by mellow brick buildings, there is grass, and tall oaks, magnolias and crepe myrtle trees (all planted since 1925.) A safe, park-like setting in the midst of an area that can display the worst of city blight—the atmosphere of Kingsley House itself is one more method by which it relieves urban pain. And, the new additions will not change the overall effect, but enhance it. The planned renovation and expansion work, under architect Peter Trapolin, has been approved by the Historic District Landmarks Commission. The St. Thomas/Irish Channel Consortium and the Community Resource Partnership provided input to the plans.

Centennial events this year include a joint celebration with the Friends of City Park for a Shakespeare Play and Garden Party, a Fall Festival on the Kingsley House Grounds, and an exhibit on the History of Kingsley House at the Louisiana State Museum: Ground-breaking for new nursery school building was held, as was a celebration of the Centennial with 100 New Orleanians honored by the Kingsley House family for their community service.

The Kingsley House story has been told in books (“A Center of Brightness” by Louise Guyol, 1962; and “Good Neighbor Eleanor McMain of Kingsley House” by Isabelle Dubroca, reissued by Pelican Publishing Company, 1955) and in many scholarly papers, theses and dissertations. Four recipients of the *Times-Picayune* Loving Cup counted Kingsley House as a major recipient of their love and labor (Eleanor McMain, 1918; Frank B. Williams, 1925; Warren Kearny, 1935; and Diana Lewis, 1994.) Remarkably, Kingsley House has not only endured, it has flourished. The idea of the settlement house, a nineteenth century concept, will shortly be greeting the twenty-first century.

“Kingsley House, to me, was the conception of the kind of center we ought to have had all over the city,” John Wall insists. It is tempting to agree. You can catch something of that infectious Kingsley House spirit by watching the Headstart kids at play, seeing the older audience laughing over their bingo cards, or hearing the following typical story:

A grandmother spending the day at Kingsley House recognized an old friend, now a social worker with the Children’s Hospital program located on the premises. The social worker, a former grade school teacher, had been a good influence on the older woman’s grandson. Could she bring him in for a talk? He was thinking about dropping out of high school. Of course he could come in – he was not enrolled in an official program, but the social worker and a colleague would be glad to talk with the young man. And no, he didn’t drop out. He joined the army, and his grandmother proudly brought him back to Kingsley House in his uniform to say thank you.

That’s the sort of Kingsley House story that continues through the years.

“Settlement means... to stabilize or put on a permanent basis. Kingsley House is, in that sense, a settlement house yet. Those elements of society that were long neglected yet remain unsettled. In a time of great social crisis, Kingsley House faces its ability to help achieve a lasting, healthy society.”

*Joseph Friend, President of the Board
Kingsley House
March 31, 1971*