



# Queens kids visit Ribe, Denmark

*Over a century before the advent of the “social journalism” which helped launch TV-personalities like Anderson Cooper, Danish-born Jacob A. Riis made a difference to New York’s poor and underprivileged.*

Located in the Queensbridge Houses in Queens, N.Y. is the Jacob A. Riis Settlement, established in 1889. Although no flags herald its origins, the Settlement was created by a Dane, Jacob Riis (1849-1914), who immigrated to New York in 1870. Riis, who wanted to make a difference in the lives of the less fortunate, created the Settlement House to offer the less-well-to-do sewing classes, health clubs, and summer camps. He was one of the first muckraking journalists, documenting the dire conditions of the poor. In 1890 his photojournalistic opus *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, was published. In time, the Settlement broadened its scope of activities, and today the center, a non-profit organization, offers comprehensive services to families in the Western Queens community, aiding them in reaching their greatest potential and achieving social and economic self-sufficiency.

Thanks to the efforts of its Chairman C. Flemming Heilmann, the Settlement House is today establishing a bridge between Queens and Riis’ hometown, Ribe, Denmark.

Last year, six kids from the Settlement visited Ribe. For one week these inner-city teens were faced with the quaint cobble-stoned streets and half-timbered houses of Denmark’s oldest town (with 9,000 inhabitants). *Nordic Reach* asked three of them, 17-year old Kelci Koonce, 17-year old Denver Fuller, and 18-year old Iftikhar Mahmud about their experiences from the trip.

“The week went by much too fast,” said Iftikhar. “Yeah, and we bonded with everybody!” Denver added.

“I felt so close to my Danish host family,” said Kelci. “I didn’t want to leave.”

What surprised them the most about Denmark was the miniscule size of Ribe (“you could practically bike right through it in ten minutes!”), the fact that Danes speak English fluently, and that they consume a whole lot of potatoes. These eye-openers aside, the kids quickly fell in love with the quaint Danish town and its inhabitants.

“Making friends was easy, because the kids there were our age and listened to the same kind of music, and they all spoke English,” said Denver.

A week packed with activities like museum-visits, canoeing, a trip to Legoland, and Fourth of July

celebrations in Rebild was fine, but hanging out with their Danish counterparts was the best part of the trip. Said Iftikhar:

“We stayed up till late at night just talking.”  
“I met some Danish rappers who were very good. Now we’ve helped them create a page at My Space for their music,” Denver said. “I am into music production, and I was happy to meet kids over there who shared my interest.”

For William Newlin, the Executive Director of the Jacob A. Riis Settlement, the journey was also a success.

“It was a unique experience for me personally,” he said. “But most rewarding was to get the kids over there – it was a big deal. They experienced something I never did as a kid. Seeing our kids interact on a daily basis with their host families was the hallmark, definitely among the top-ten highlights in the Jacob A. Riis Settlement’s history.”

This summer, a group of kids from Ribe will visit the Settlement in Queens.

“We will show them what city life is like!” said Denver about the prospect of having his Danish friends come over.

“Yeah, and we’ll take them to Coney Island!” said Kelci.

A contemporary of, and greatly influenced by, the reporting of Charles Dickens while himself in turn inspiring journalist and novelist Jack London Riis crowned a career as police reporter by publishing “How the other half lives” (1890)-the report, a pioneering photojournalistic work, became a landmark work for social reformers of the day. Then-Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt mentioned Riis as “the most useful citizen of New York”. His reporting predated much of the muckraking journalism so favored by magazines such as *The Independent*, *McClure’s* or the *Cosmopolitan* of the early 20th century.

## JACOB A. RIIS TIMELINE

- 1849 . Jacob A. Riis is born in Ribe Denmark
- 1870 . Riis immigrates to the United States, which is struggling in social turmoil. He lodges with other poor immigrants in New York, spending many nights in police-run poor houses.
- 1873 . Riis starts a career as a police reporter for a string of newspapers, often working in the crime-

ridden city slums. A witness to the police brutality and the miserable conditions, Riis resolves to make a difference. The novelty of flash powder allows him to become one of the first American journalists to take photographs in the dark of night, capturing the life of the poor.

1888 . Riis collaborates with an organization of Episcopalian church women, the Daughters of the King, to establish what is eventually called the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House. (The Settlement House movement had begun in England in the late 1800’s when wealthy university students would go and settle among the poor and work to change their conditions.)

1889 . Scribner’s Magazine publishes a photo essay by Riis on city life.

1890 . Riis’ book *How the Other Half Lives* is published. Theodore Roosevelt, then-Commissioner of Police, closes down all police-run poor houses after having read Riis’ book. The two men become life-long friends, and Roosevelt refers to Riis as “the best American I ever knew.”

1897 . The Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House moves into its first home at 48 Henry Street.

1907 . Riis moves to a farm in Barre, Massachusetts.

1914 . Riis dies at his farm.

1940’s – 1950’s . The Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House begins offering programs for residents of public housing developments in Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. The original Settlement House is sold and in 1950, the Jacob A. Riis Settlement House moves all its activities to its current address at the Queensbridge Houses in Long Island City, Queens.

1996 . The Danish Consul General of New York, Hans Grunnet, learns of the Riis Settlement and its founder’s Danish connection, and takes an interest. He asks Danish businessman C. Flemming Heilmann to join the Settlement’s Board. As Chairman, Heilmann plays a major role in the Settlement’s fundraising and creates a link between the youth at the Settlement House and the children in Riis’ hometown Ribe, Denmark. With the Danish connection re-established, HRH Princess Benedikte of Denmark becomes a patron and visits the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House whenever she is in New York.

2006 . On Heilmann’s initiative, six teens from Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House visit Ribe, Denmark.

2007 . Eight teens from Ribe, Denmark visit the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House during the summer.

For more info, see [www.riissettlement.org](http://www.riissettlement.org)