Scores of El Pasans celebrated the opening of the YWCA Centennial Exhibit the evening of April 23, 2009, at the Museum of History downtown. The exhibit, which runs through September, traces the beginnings and development of the YWCA El Paso del Norte Region to the present, complete with photographs and artifacts which have been preserved over the years. The El Paso association is the largest YWCA in the country.

Begun in England in 1855 to assist women who were working outside of their own homes as well as women moving to larger cities from the provinces, the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) quickly found interest in the United States, with the first group organizing in 1858 in New York City. Two years later, this group opened the first boarding house for female teachers, factory workers and students. Known as the Ladies’ Christian Association of New York, it had as its objective “to labor for the temporal, moral and religious welfare of young women who are dependent on their own exertions for support.”

In 1907, the YWCA of the USA was incorporated in New York City. Similar groups spread to the East Coast and Midwest with programs including prayer meetings and Bible classes, employment bureaus and restaurants, as well as boarding homes. Just as today’s Ys always offer fitness and exercise programs, many of the early groups provided programs in calisthenics and physical exercise to help women to withstand the effects of long and hard work in factory and office.

1909-1918 The Beginning

In 1909, a group from the Women’s Missionary Union representing the Protestant churches of El Paso met to organize a YWCA to take over its work. Mabel Stafford, a national YWCA secretary, came to town to help organize the association, and the women had their first meeting on April 8, 1909, at the First Christian Church, where all of the Union’s property was given to the new group, including two lots on Missouri Street, furnishings, cash and mining stock. Carrie Smith, the first president of the YWCA, accepted the gift. One month later, the association set up offices on the second floor of the Herald Building. The women first established a lunch room and then provided a residence for the many women who had come to El Paso seeking a healthier climate and employment in the city whose population surged from 15,906 in 1900 to 77,560 in 1920.

By February 1910, the YWCA had raised more than $10,000 of the $20,000 needed to build the boarding house on 541 West Missouri St. Realizing that the group needed outside financing, Mabel Stafford explained the group’s predicament in a letter delivered to Mrs. Russell Sage, a wealthy New Yorker and friends in the New York YWCA, who came through El Paso by train on her way to California. Mrs. Sage sent the El Paso women $10,000 for the residence, and on March 13, the women held a groundbreaking ceremony. The boarding house opened in October 1910 and served the needs of young women who came through or stayed here until May of 1941, when the building was sold and became the Harvey Hotel.

Also in 1910, the YWCA opened a gymnasium in rented space to meet the need for physical exercise.

In 1916, business and professional women organized a club at the YWCA, sponsoring a loan fund for girls and women who needed financial assistance by raising money through concerts and vaudeville entertainment. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, the club organized a Red Cross Circle to make bandages and knit garments for soldiers and sailors. They made 15,000 bandages and knit 300 mufflers, sweaters, helmets, wristlets and socks.

Although the YWCA had built a boarding house, its offices had always been rented, and between 1909 and 1916, the group moved four times. In one of their most successful fund-raising drives, YWCA workers raised $70,000 in a seven-day period from January 25 to February 1, 1917, to construct a permanent office building. Several out-of-town donors gave $30,000, and some 2,287 subscribers raised another $123,252.

This fundraising campaign was the first of its kind in El Paso. Adolph Schwartz, owner of the Popular Dry Goods Co., said of his support, “I regard this subscription as an investment which will yield returns through the girls employed in my store who are members of the YWCA.”

The new building at 315 East Franklin St. was dedicated on February 3, 1918, and served the association until 1969.

While serving working women, the YWCA turned to consider the needs of adolescent girls, and the Girl Reserves were born in 1918. A Girl Reserve was “a girl who is constantly storing up putting in reserve, more of those qualities which will help her to take her place as a Christian citizen in her home, her school, her church and her community.”

The Girl Reserves organized into clubs, many associated with schools, and each club had an adult advisor who worked with the girls on programs based on their particular needs and desires.

El Paso YWCA Presidents

Mrs. Robert Bruce Smith 1909-1910
Sandra Almanzan 2009-2010

Rest-A-While cottage in Cloudcroft, N.M., was built on land donated by Horace B. Stevens.

Girl Reserves and Y-Teens enjoyed the cool mountain air while at summer camp at Rest-A-While cottage. (Photos courtesy of YWCA El Paso del Norte Region)
The clubs included special songs, rituals, conferences, training programs and uniforms. The national organization provided materials outlining programs for grade school, high school and employed girls under age 18. Prominent businessman Horace B. Stevens donated three lots in Cloudcroft in 1913 on which to build a summer cottage named “Rest-A-While” that was used for summer camps for Girl Reserves and Y-Teens through 1961 when it was sold.

1919-1948 Meeting Needs in an Uncertain World

Throughout this period, El Paso’s population continued to grow, and in 1920 women won the right to vote. In 1919, the National Board of the YWCA established the Hospitality House at the international bridge to aid Mexican immigrants. The local War Work Council of the YWCA began the International Institute for Spanish-speaking women at 122½ South Mesa St., where instructors taught cooking, sewing and English classes.

In 1922, the YWCA organized a World Fellowship Committee to promote better understanding among girls of all races and creeds. This committee organized lectures and activities that helped members learn about and appreciate other cultures, foreshadowing the YWCA’s current imperative to eliminate racism.

Locally, an African-American woman was added to the Girl Reserves Committee in 1930 to represent African-American girls’ clubs. Former YWCA Board Member Frances Hills said, “The fact that they invited us (African-American girls) to come and participate in their general meeting of the Girls Reserves was really a step in the right direction of eliminating racism.”

During the Depression, the El Paso YWCA opened a Relief School for unemployed women, the only one in Texas and one in a handful in the country. Administered by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the residential program took 45 women between the ages of 18 and 30 and paid their room and board tuition at schools and colleges where they took courses in business, English, physiology and salesmanship, health, and public speaking and dramatics.

As the country entered World War II, the YWCA adapted its regular program to reinforce the contribution of women and meet the tremendous pressures created by the war. Programs included leadership development, health and recreation, and current trends in world, national, and local affairs.

1949-1968 Planning for the Future

The Girl Reserves became the Y-Teens in 1946, and clubs at Jefferson High School and El Paso Technical Institute joined clubs at Douglass School and El Paso, Austin and Bowie High Schools. Hired to head the Teen Department, Patty Hudgens lived as a resident in the YWCA World Service Council Board Member and namesake of this branch.


By 1970, El Paso’s population was 322,261, with one of the lowest median incomes of any city in this

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country. Its population was young, 20.8 years, and its major industry was clothing manufacturing, employing more than 10,000 women, many with young children. The YWCA began working with other agencies to combat the social problems of the era. Funding was secured from federal, state, and private sources. Kay McIntyre retired in 1969, and taking her place was Myrna Deckert, who would hold the position of Executive Director of El Paso’s YWCA until 2002.

Deckert began to work on diversifying the membership of the board of directors and staff, and among the first Hispanic women on the board were Rosa Guerrero, Leticia Paez and Rosa Gonzalez. Susan today. Leticia Paez, former Y-Teen member and YWCA the delegates adopted this imperative and it remains so remembers what the One Imperative discussion meant resolution that the elimination of racism be the singular of concern for community housing.

Several local YWCA leaders have served on Board of Directors of the YWCA of the USA and on the World Service Council. In 1999, the El Paso YWCA served as fiscal agent for the Change Initiative, a massive reorganization plan approved by the membership at a special convention in Dallas in 2000. Former El Paso YWCA Board President Leticia Paez served as the first president of the newly created YWCA National Coordinating Board.

El Paso’s YWCA created its Racial Justice Committee in 1997 to foster awareness on racism and discrimination to staff, participants and the El Paso community. The association collaborates with the El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center on the Racial Justice Institute which offers a curriculum of 150+ modules available for training seminars for businesses and community groups. The Racial Justice “We…people” Initiative fosters justice, appreciation for diversity and the elimination of racism through core values of Respect, Understanding, Acceptance and Appreciation through education, collaboration, dialogue and advocacy.

Most El Pasoans think of recreation and child care when the YWCA is mentioned, and indeed, it provides these services and services in these areas. But there is so much more, as a compilation of its history shows. In 1994, some 800 people attended the first Women’s Benefit Luncheon, the YWCA’s major fundraising event, raising $100,000. On April 16, 2009, Lisa Ling spoke to a gathering of about 1,650 women and men at the YWCA’s annual event, raising $423,653. The YWCA is a careful steward in its financial resources, stretching its dollars to serve more than 100,000 people per year. Just as important as its 2,000 trained volunteers throughout the community who help implement their programs.

On May 3, 2009, the national YWCA General Assembly voted by 91 percent to revise its mission statement to the following: YWCA is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all. Ever mindful of changing roles of women, the YWCA El Paso del Norte has continually focused on expanding its opportunities and services in这些 areas. Just as important as its 2,000 trained volunteers throughout the community who help implement their programs.

In 1999, the El Paso YWCA opened the Judy and Kirk Robison Mi Casa Child Development Center for homeless children in cooperation with the Homeless Coalition. Today the YWCA provides child care in 14 pre-school child development centers and 51 after-school programs throughout El Paso. Five of the child development centers were among the first to receive Texas School Readiness certification, and the Texas Early Education Model (TEEM) selected the YWCA in 2009 to pilot a new academic curriculum for toddlers. In 2008, the Y began negotiations with the U.S. Army to implement after-school, youth and child care programs to serve soldiers relocating to Fort Bliss through the BRAC process.

In 2008, the association piloted YW Zones, a youth fitness initiative featuring GEO Fit Curriculum, Wii Fit gaming systems and fitness lessons through interactive dance instruction. A grant has made it possible to expand the YW Zones to all five branches and incorporate fitness activities into after-school programs.

Homeless women and children, often fleeing violent domestic situations, are being helped by the Sara McKnight Transitional Living Center (TLC), opened in 1993. They may stay for up to 24 months while they participate in activities to help them transition to permanent housing. A 20-family expansion of the TLC opened in 2005 on Altura Avenue. A former resident commented, “The TLC fostered healthy thinking in my mind, which is what turned me around. They could have given me a place to stay for a moment, and that would have been fine. But because that extra piece was there to help change my thinking, it completely changed my life.”

With the Junior League of El Paso, the YWCA constructed Independence House, offering housing, case management and mentorship to survivors of domestic abuse. The YWCA is the largest provider of transitional housing for El Paso families and in 2007-2008, 82 percent of the families in such programs moved to permanent housing.

In 2007, the local YWCA’s separate Community Development Corporation completed 12 apartments adjacent to the Lower Valley Branch, offering housing help to those independent and remain active in their community as yet another example of concern for community housing.

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