



# 1907-2007

## Eliminating Racism at the YWCA

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While the YWCA of Asheville can be proud of being one of the early voices in Asheville calling for racial justice and improved race relations, the association has had its fair share of struggle around race. As YWCA committees trumpeted integration and racial justice in the community, they also had to address racism within the organization itself.

National YWCA policy dictated that there was to be only one YWCA in each city. Thus, a Negro YWCA, such as the Phyllis Wheatley association in Asheville, was mandated to be affiliated as a branch under the authority of a White association. While this was the mandate, the Phyllis Wheatley branch in fact functioned as a separate entity, carrying its own administrative budget and owning its own property.



Women at international event at the YWCA, 1955. [0623] YWCA Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, UNC Asheville 28804.

This independence was not called into question until the Community Chest, forerunner to the United Way, began exerting financial stipulations that required the Central YWCA (White) to begin exercising control over the Phyllis Wheatley branch. There was resistance to the idea, but the Community Chest had the last word and in 1929 withheld partial funding from Phyllis Wheatley, severely impacting its wellbeing. By 1936 all Community Chest funding was withheld. Tensions were heightened when the Phyllis Wheatley leadership rejected a list of recommendations from the Central YWCA regarding governance and oversight.

Consequently, Phyllis Wheatley was formally severed as a YWCA branch on February 6, 1936. In June 1938, by agreeing to conform to the Central YWCA's



Phyllis Wheatley women: Willie Moore, D. Glenn, Mrs. Brown, Lucille P. Burton, E. Dailey, J. Few, H. Swan, 1950s. [0626] YWCA Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, UNC Asheville 28804.

recommendations, Phyllis Wheatley became a YWCA branch again and was also reinstated as a Community Chest funded organization.

Despite this rough going early on, there were indications of cooperation and communication between the Central YWCA and Phyllis Wheatley. Early records indicate that the Central YWCA board of directors appointed one of its members as liaison officer to the Negro branch. And in 1935, Phyllis Wheatley hosted round table discussions on "Better Inter-Racial Understanding" to improve relations between the two entities.

In 1954, the election of Lucille Burton—the first Negro member of the Central YWCA board of directors—put the YWCA on the path towards integration. Inroads were also being made in the youth programs. Pat Larsen, Y-Teens director at the Central YWCA, worked with Arnie Johnson, Phyllis Wheatley Y-Teens Director, to create joint ventures in the early 1950s.

When the YWCA's biracial Public Affairs Committee began advocating for racial justice and integration of workplaces and schools, their public efforts required the YWCA to examine its own house. In 1963, the YWCA board of directors passed a motion to "accept all women and girls regardless of race or creed in all facilities, programs, and services of the YWCA." The most controversial aspect of the action directed the Central YWCA's boarding facility, Moorhead House, to accept Negro residents. Integrating Moorhead House proved to be a courageous step by the YWCA board because it meant alienating one of its largest donors.

Subsequently, the YWCA leadership began taking small, strategic steps toward implementing full integration. E. Thelma Caldwell, the Black Branch Director, and the Public Affairs Committee were very thoughtful and deliberate about the process. For example, Mrs. Caldwell believed that White adults would be more accepting of integration if it started with children. Therefore, the Committee began by integrating children's swimming lessons at the White facility and paired White members of the Public Affairs Committee with Black children for these lessons.

In 1965, the YWCA of Asheville hired E. Thelma Caldwell as Executive Director over both facilities



"Foreign Delights" folk dancing at the YWCA, 1967. Photo courtesy of the YMI Cultural Center.

making her the first Black YWCA Executive Director in the South, and only the second in the USA. Membership rolls of both branches were combined in 1967, making the YWCA of Asheville the first YWCA officially to integrate in the South. Soon after that, White activities, such as the Young Wives Club, started being scheduled at South French Broad Avenue, the site of the Black YWCA. However, the activities themselves still remained primarily either all Black or all White. Also in 1967, at the South French Broad branch, the YWCA began hosting "Foreign Delights," monthly family-night dinners specifically for people to learn about other cultures. These potluck dinners usually included folk dancing and were attended by people of different racial backgrounds. Board members have emphasized the significant impact these evenings had on improving understanding across cultural divides.

In 1971, all activities and programs of the two branches of the YWCA finally came together under one roof at 185 South French Broad Avenue. Today, the YWCA is a thriving community center where people of all backgrounds feel welcome.



YWCA Annual Meeting, 1981. [0240] YWCA Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, UNC Asheville 28804.

**eliminating racism**  
**empowering women**  
ywca