

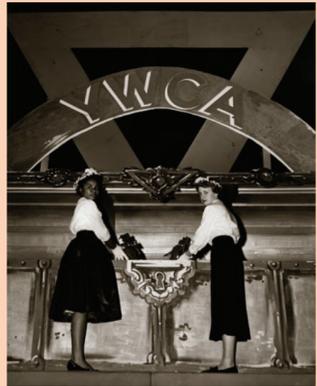


# 1907-2007

## Eliminating Racism in Asheville

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In the early 1920s, a Committee on Colored Work was established in Asheville by Adela Ruffin, secretary for the Phyllis Wheatley branch of the YWCA. The committee's purpose was "to promote good feeling between the races and remove causes of friction in the community and to better the condition of Colored people." This committee was composed of three White women and three Negro women

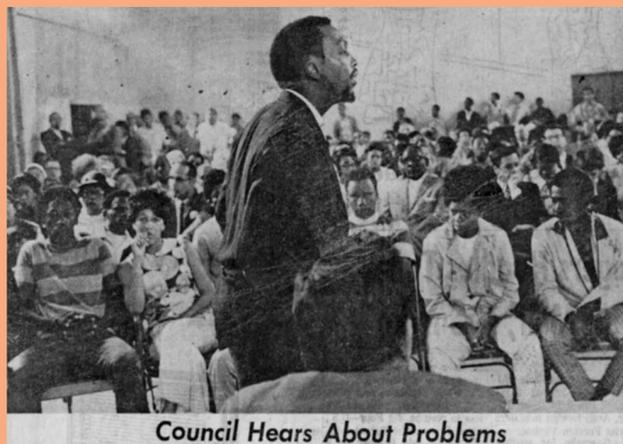


YWCA Conference, 1920s. Photo courtesy of the YMI Cultural Center.

who met monthly. In 1928, this committee held a conference on race relations entitled "The Homemaker and Her Help." Although not spelled out in the original purpose of the YWCA, the work of this committee reveals that race relations were vital in the work of the YWCA very early on, and the elimination of racism has long been at the core of the YWCA's current mission.

The Public Affairs Committee (PAC) of the YWCA was the driver for the YWCA's early leadership in racial justice issues in Asheville. In preparation for desegregation of the public schools, in 1953, the YWCA PAC hosted an inter-racial forum in conjunction with the PTA Councils, Council of Jewish Women, and the United Church Women.

In 1956 Eleanor Roosevelt was invited to Asheville by the YWCA PAC to speak about the United



Council Hears About Problems

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Starting in 1969, the Asheville Buncombe Community Relations Council sponsored meetings and hearings at the YWCA where participants found a safe place to air concerns about employment issues, police relations, and all other racial problems facing the community.

*"The doors of the YWCA were doors anybody could walk through and feel comfortable. The YWCA was really walking the talk, not just talking."*  
 – Kathleen Balogh, YWCA Board President, 1988-1990

Nations. Mrs. Roosevelt stipulated that she would only speak to non-segregated groups. The YWCA was the only place in Asheville willing to host an integrated audience and was honored to host the former First Lady. Mrs. Roosevelt spoke to an overflowing crowd of an estimated 800 people at the Central YWCA at 13 Grove Street.

The YWCA PAC successfully lobbied the Winn-Dixie supermarket to integrate its workforce in 1962. Following this achievement, the YWCA continued its efforts to work with other local companies such as A&P, Sears, J.C. Penny's, Belk's Department Store, and Bon Marche toward the goal of an integrated workforce.

As the challenges of race relations grew in Asheville, the YWCA's leadership did not wane. The YWCA Public Affairs Committee organized a series of four workshops in 1963 entitled "The Challenge of Integration," which covered issues related to schools, jobs, and housing. Approximately 250 people attended these meetings resulting in a report with twenty recommendations to city and school officials. The recommendations included the following:

- The appointment of a qualified Negro to the city school board
- More centers for adult education, both Negro and White
- Integration of all civic groups
- Immediate integration of county schools
- Group support to Negroes applying for a transfer from a Negro school to a White school

As a direct result of these meetings, St. Joseph's Hospital pledged to integrate its nursing department. Another outcome of these meetings was the implementation of study halls at the YWCA to help Negro students prepare for eventual integration.

Executive Director E. Thelma Caldwell attended the 25th YWCA National Convention in Houston in April 1970. That historic convention issued the "One Imperative," which called the YWCA to "thrust its collective power to the elimination of racism wherever it exists and by any means necessary." This new focus for the YWCA nationwide caused both excitement and uneasiness for local associations, including the YWCA of

Asheville. The urgency in this message was a welcome signal to Black YWCA members but felt threatening to some White YWCA members.

Mrs. Caldwell had already been working strategically with the board of directors to integrate the services of the YWCA of Asheville. In December 1970, the board voted to close the Grove Street facility, which was primarily White, and move all YWCA activities to the branch on South French Broad, which was primarily Black.



Participants in Project Aware, 1971. Photo courtesy of James McDowell.

Shortly after that, the YWCA launched one of the most significant race relations programs in Asheville. In 1971, the YWCA of Asheville received

*"Being part of that program was very fulfilling. It changed people's lives. People came away with an understanding they never had. It was hard-hitting."*

–James McDowell,  
Project Aware participant

a federal HUD grant to start "Project Aware," a program to facilitate better racial understanding among young adults. Through in-depth retreats, weekly discussions, and cross-cultural living experiences, a dozen youth increased

their understanding of "how the other side lives." During weekends, Whites lived with Black families and Blacks lived with White families. This program had a lasting impact on its participants.

Many women who became involved in the YWCA after integration described it as the one place in Asheville where Blacks and Whites were both involved, a place working to welcome all people.

**eliminating racism  
empowering women**  
ywca