



1907-2007

E. Thelma Caldwell & the YWCA Boosters

E. Thelma Caldwell

In the past one hundred years, the YWCA of Asheville has been privileged to have some outstanding, committed executive leadership. In the first century of service, thirty-seven women have held this position. Perhaps the most significant YWCA Executive Director of the century was E. Thelma Caldwell.



E. Thelma Caldwell, 1970s. [0706] YWCA Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, UNC Asheville 28804.

E. Thelma Caldwell came to Asheville in 1961 to be the Phyllis Wheatly Branch Director. In 1965, the Central YWCA of Asheville hired her to be their Executive Director, which gave her oversight of both

the White and Black branches. This made Thelma only the second Black YWCA Executive Director in the United States and the first in the South.



E. Thelma Caldwell, 1981. Photo courtesy of the YMI Cultural Center.

“A Negro executive was virtually unheard of... there was only one in the whole United States and that was in Buffalo, New York. Could it be possible to have the second one in the South, in Asheville?”
–E. Thelma Caldwell

Much was accomplished under Thelma’s executive leadership from 1965-1975, including major building renovations to the South French Broad location, the launching of a school for teen moms, and the initiation of numerous childcare programs. The most significant accomplishment for Thelma was physical integration of the Black and White YWCAs. She was a visionary whose courage shepherded this monumental change.



E. Thelma Caldwell served as Honorary Chair of the YWCA’s Capital Campaign 1999-2001.

YWCA Boosters

After the White and Black branches consolidated, new challenges regarding race emerged for the YWCA, particularly in terms of fundraising. Determined to carry on Thelma’s work, in 1976 twenty-two Black retired YWCA board members formed the YWCA Booster Club to supplement the current board’s efforts and in particular to be a support to the first Black board president, Ollie Reynolds. Also during that time, several Black women of the YWCA were concerned about losing their identity in the merger. Thus, the formation of this group also addressed this need for special connection. In the early 1980s, several White women who had been very committed to the integration of the YWCA were invited to join the Boosters.

“The Booster Club originated in a spirit of loyalty and support when the request was made by Ollie Reynolds, then President of the YWCA board of directors, to her peer group, to return to more active Y support now that they were retired.”

–Mary Jane Kelly, Original Booster



Boosters, 1990. (Seated, left to right) Marjorie Lockwood, Ruth Cannon, Jean Johnson, Lucy Harrison, Ethel Dailey, Gertrude Peterson, Llewellyn Perry (Standing, left to right) Orine Wiggins, Betty Williams, Josephine Schaeffer, Ethel White, Inez Daugherty, Una Mae Lundberg, Franklyn Owens, Erna Earle, Gladys Kennedy, Jo Flemming, Sally Bridenstine, Reba Harrison, Gussie Halliburton, Mary Parker. [0750] YWCA Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, UNC Asheville 28804.



Boosters, 2007. (Front row, left to right) Llewellyn Perry, Helen Edington, Mary Parker. (Back row, left to right) Bell Shipley, Gussie Halliburton, Willie Vincent, Jean Johnson, Lettie Polite, Georgia Allen, Agnes Jones. Photo by Chris Clevenger.

In addition to supporting YWCA financial needs such as purchasing business equipment, remodeling offices, and providing youth scholarships, this group of women Boosters also organized trips and developed enrichment programs.

While their initial purpose was to support the YWCA, over the years the Booster Club became a close knit group of friends, Black and White, meeting every first Wednesday at the YWCA or at a Booster’s house.



Lew Perry, Julia Ray, Emily Boyce, E. Thelma Caldwell and Leona Owens, 1996. [0768] YWCA Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, UNC Asheville 28804.

“What is remarkable about this group is that it is an interracial group of friends ages 60 to 90! The YW Boosters do not provide programs or services around diversity. They are simply and profoundly living testaments to a vision of a multicultural community, a beloved community, a community of women who pray for each other, send get well cards to each other, party together, even travel together.”
–Holly Jones, YWCA Executive Director 1996 –

**eliminating racism
empowering women**
ywca