



Empowering Women

For a century the YWCA of Asheville has been a safe haven, a community gathering place, and a place to exercise, but its essence has been dedicated to improving the economic wellbeing of women. One hundred years ago, a few insightful city fathers and mothers became concerned that women



Phyllis Wheatley Business and Professional Women's Club, 1951. [0684] YWCA Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, UNC Asheville 28804.

coming to Asheville to find employment did not have appropriate living options. To address this concern the YWCA of Asheville was founded. On a parallel track, in that same decade, a group of Negro women were gathering. They called themselves the Employment Club and were committed to finding jobs and providing support for hard-working Negro women. They established the Phyllis Wheatley branch of the YWCA.

In addition to offering safe, affordable housing and wholesome meals for young working women from out of town, the YWCA also supported the many women living in Asheville who were seeking employment. From the beginning, the YWCA founders understood the link between the wellbeing of women and their economic success.

During the 1920s, the Phyllis Wheatley branch acted as an informal employment referral agency for Negro girls looking for work primarily in domestic services, which included hotels, boarding houses, restaurants, and private homes. Adela Ruffin, Executive Secretary of the Phyllis Wheatley branch, was viewed in the community as one of the key references for good Negro employees. One of the branch's most important committees was the



Nurses at the Phyllis Wheatley branch, 1940s. Photo courtesy of the YMI Cultural Center.

Committee on Colored Work because of the lack of employment opportunities for Negroes living in Asheville.

The Girl Reserves of Phyllis Wheatley and the Central YWCA organized classes to support unemployed girls and offer aid. The Central YWCA offered classes for unemployed women entitled "Learn While You Do Not Earn." The classes included clerking, office work, practical nursing, and "Helpful Hints on How to Get a Job and Keep It." Their purpose was to keep morale up and help participants spend their leisure time in an efficient manner. In 1932, the Girl Reserves offered classes for 200 unemployed women. The Phyllis Wheatley branch held adult classes that taught vocational skills such as care of rooms, table services, laundry work, sewing, cooking, and child nursing. Also occurring early



Phyllis Wheatley sewing class, 1960s. [0675] YWCA Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, UNC Asheville 28804.



Educational program, 1970s. Photo courtesy of the YMI Cultural Center.

was the formation of committees and clubs for working women. The Phyllis Wheatley branch had the Business and Professional Women's Club. At the Central YWCA, a club was formed for young employed women, and the Business Girls' League served older women. In the 1940s, the Business Girls' League provided classes in self-improvement, social activities, and leadership opportunities.

The YWCA Women's Center was established in 1987 in collaboration with the Buncombe County Women's Commission. It was located in a house across the street from the YWCA at 166 South French Broad Avenue. Services included a resource library, workshops, and referrals. The Women's Center also had a job club for women who had been out of the workforce for some time. Education programs included "New Trends for Women in the Workforce."



"Women Mean Business" event, 1980s. [0231] YWCA Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, UNC Asheville 28804.

In 1991 the YWCA launched its premier fundraising event, Tribute to Women in Industry or TWIN. The purpose of TWIN was to honor women who have made a significant contribution to business and industry in managerial and professional roles and to recognize local businesses whose personnel practices support such achievement. The event name was changed in 2005 to the Tribute to Women of Influence, to better reflect the nature of the local economy.

In 1999 the YWCA identified a growing need in the community to serve women striving for economic self-sufficiency. As a result, NEWS (now New Choices), was launched with the support of the North Carolina Department of Administration. Through case-management, access to child care, group support, and job-skills building, this program continues to serve women living below the poverty level who want to achieve economic self-sufficiency.

With program after program designed to support working women—from training for work, providing affordable child care, contributing to the workforce wellness movement, and teaching life-skills—the YWCA has been in the vanguard of the movement toward financial self-sufficiency for women.



Women's services, 1980s. [0220] YWCA Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, UNC Asheville 28804.

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