

“MORE THAN CLASSES IN SWIMMING AND MAKING
HATS”: THE YWCA AND SOCIAL REFORM

IN HOUSTON, TEXAS, 1907-1977

by

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ABSTRACT

The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) began in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century. It had as its purpose the assistance of young, single women who sought employment in the many urban areas throughout the nation. The association spread from the northeastern United States throughout the country.

The Houston YWCA began in 1907, as the city began its tremendous growth into a major metropolitan area and at the height of the Progressive Era. The association quickly involved itself in many of the social reforms of the day. As it did so, the Houston YWCA Board of Directors found itself struggling to meet the directives of the National YWCA Board, the needs of its paid membership, and the demands of the local citizens who funded its programs.

This dissertation explores the role of the YWCA as an agent of social reform in Houston from 1907 through 1977. Recent studies of the YWCA have focused on various aspects of the organization, ranging from its religious teachings, its attempts to organize an African-American branch, to its program offerings to the local citizens. No study to date has explored the activities of the Houston YWCA. The city of Houston boasted a diverse population with a large number of African-American and Latino citizens. The opening of a city YWCA in 1907 coincided with the phenomenal growth of Houston. The association quickly

became a prominent women's organization and gained the respect of city leaders.

In addition, no study has explored the impact of funding on the activities of a city association. This dissertation explores the attempts of a women's organization to act as an agent of social reform in a major metropolitan city. It also attempts to show how the dictates of a national organization don't always come to fruition as quickly at the local level. The demands of funding agencies and the apprehensions of local citizens regarding change often dictated the success or failure of social reform programs. For the women associated with the Houston YWCA, the decision to adhere to national dictates or acquiesce to citizens concerns fell on the shoulders of the volunteer Board of Directors. In many ways, the actions of the Houston association were the actions of the Board of Directors.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CWPAGH – Community Welfare Planning Association of Greater Houston

HAY – Houston Action for Youth

HMRC – Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library,
Houston, Texas

HOPE – Human, Organizational, Political, Economic

JCYW – Job Corps – YWCA

JOY – Job Opportunity for Youth

NOW – National Organization for Women

OEO – Office of Economic Opportunity

SSC – Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts

VISTA – Volunteers in Service to America

WICS – Women in Community Service

YMCA – Young Men’s Christian Association

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Houston Young Women's Christian Association (Houston YWCA), organized in 1907, was the first such city association in the American Southwest. It grew from an organization serving primarily white, single, employed women in 1907 to a women's movement purporting to lobby for the advancement of all women regardless of race, creed, nationality, or class. Throughout its history, the Houston YWCA struggled with issues of race, often disagreed with the social services bureau providing the majority of its operational funds, and walked a fine line between "protecting" women and advocating increased rights for women. It is a history full of milestones and contradictions.

The national Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) is one of the largest women's organizations in the world and is often considered to be a voluntary association. Its origins date back to the mid-1800s when the association had as its focus the young, single women seeking employment in the growing urban and industrial areas of the United States. Throughout its history in the United States, the YWCA has been known to lend its support to protective legislation for women, to professional training of staff members, to early attempts at breaking down race and class barriers, and to the burgeoning feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Although the YWCA operates on a national and international level, local city associations must adapt their programs to accommodate their dues-paying membership. Historically the ideals professed by the National Board of the YWCA did not always come to fruition at the local level as quickly as the National Board may have desired. Whether addressing labor issues, racial discrimination and segregation, or sex discrimination, some city associations often found themselves battling generations-old beliefs regarding racial inferiority or community prejudices regarding the proper role of women. For southern YWCAs, the problems faced relating to racial inclusiveness policies were most noticeable but other issues were present.

Numerous studies relating to the history of the YWCA have focused on the relationship of African-American branches to the predominantly white central associations, race relations within the national organization, the YWCA's involvement in the various peace initiatives, and the changing focus of the association regarding women's issues. Most studies tend to be centered on YWCAs in the Northeast or Midwest regions of the United States. Since the early YWCAs tended to originate in industrial centers, growth in southern and western regions of the United States often lagged behind. For southern associations, adherence to national policies and maintenance of program flexibility to suit the needs of their members presented problems because the needs of women often came into conflict with accepted notions of appropriate feminine behavior and societal norms regarding proper race relations. A

balancing act, therefore, took place as the local city YWCA tried to acquiesce to national directives while at the same time finding its niche within the overall community. This was certainly the case for the Houston YWCA.

A study of the Houston YWCA allows for a focus on a southern city association emerging at a time when the city itself began experiencing phenomenal growth. Houston, by 1900, had a diverse population with large numbers of African-American and Latino residents. The city of Houston underwent major changes in population as well as economic and industrial growth after 1900. The discovery of oil along the Gulf Coast facilitated the development of a wealthier citizenry, and many Houstonians began supporting the establishment of cultural institutions and facilities they believed would add a refined touch to the booming city.

Considered the leading cotton city in the South during the late nineteenth century, in the early twentieth century Houston became known as the leading oil and petroleum center in the nation. Sugar, cotton, corn, lumber, and rice all contributed to Houston's growth, but the Spindletop gusher in Beaumont in 1901 signaled a new era for the city.¹ The city population had grown from 17,000 in 1880 to approximately 50,000 in 1900 and that growth was meager in relation to the population explosion after Spindletop.

The African-American population fluctuated between twenty-five and thirty percent of the overall city population during the first two decades of the 1900s.

¹ James L. Hadley, *Texas: From Spindletop through World War II* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

Mexican-Americans, in contrast, made up only six percent of the Texas population in 1910 but the numbers increased after 1910 as a revolution in Mexico drove numerous Mexican residents northward. Although San Antonio had the largest percentage of Mexican Americans in a Texas urban setting during the 1900s, Houston also attracted Latino workers in large numbers. A second large population boom came in the 1960s and 1970s with the continued growth of the petroleum industry and the establishment of the Johnson Space Center. By 1980, the population had grown to 2.9 million persons in the Houston metropolitan area. In addition, approximately forty percent of the city's population was either African American or Latino. During the 1970s, Houston was the fastest growing city in the nation.

The rapid growth of the city led civic leaders to attempt to control the negative aspects of such population growth. The emergence of the Houston YWCA during the Progressive Era meant that the members of the association's Board of Directors, oftentimes the wives and family members of some of the leading businessmen in the city, were aware of the needs of the burgeoning city. During the early years, the Houston YWCA focused on assisting white, single, employed women in their attempts to maintain their status and reputation. The association offered women noon Bible study meetings, a Traveler's Aid Bureau, a boarding home, a cafeteria, and an activities program. YWCA programs were popular in Houston and even appealed to both young men and local political leaders. Just as the local association began to establish itself as one of the

premier women's organizations in Houston, the nation entered into World War I. The patriotic programs of the YWCA, and in particular the Houston association, brought the organization a great deal of publicity. The mayor of the city recognized the Houston YWCA for outstanding service to the community during wartime.

During the 1920s, the local association expanded its focus. The Houston YWCA began to examine the problems of juvenile delinquency in the city, tried to support a movement for better working conditions for women in local businesses, and attempted to provide wholesome recreation and entertainment to counter the numerous dancehalls and movie theaters that the organization felt were inappropriate for young women and girls. It also became a founding member of the Houston Community Chest in 1922, linking the women's organization to the larger citywide social services program.² In addition, the work with African-American soldiers at Camp Logan during World War I led the Houston YWCA to begin operation of its branch for African-American women and girls, the Blue Triangle Branch as it was called.³

² Many large cities developed a local Community Chest to assist with the funding of local charities and other service-related organizations. The Houston Community Chest organized in 1922.

³ The United States Army erected facilities for Camp Logan in 1918. The cantonment housed numerous African-American soldiers, which caused some concern for Houston citizens. Friction between local white citizens and African-American soldiers culminated in a September 1917 riot. See Robert V. Hayes, *A Night of Violence* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976).

Work assumed by the city association at the onset of the Depression and during World War II helped to solidify the Houston YWCA's position in the local community. The 1930s proved to be a transitional period for the city association. Very few social service programs served the unemployed Houston woman during the depths of the depression. The Houston YWCA provided classes for businesswomen, allowed unemployed women to practice their trades by scheduling them to operate the elevators and run the switchboards in the Activities Center, and allowed beauticians to offer their services to the YWCA residents. More importantly, though, was the willingness of the association to lodge unemployed women at the YWCA residence while only receiving a fraction of the actual room and board cost from the federal government. Cooperation with governmental agencies and a willingness to offer programs and lodging at no cost to unemployed women, endeared the association to local officials and brought much needed positive recognition.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the Houston YWCA turned its focus to issues of race as the association began sponsoring workshops on race relations, served as a resource for other local associations grappling with racial issues, conducted surveys, and facilitated seminars. Much of the impetus for race awareness programs originated with the National Board of the YWCA in New York. Many of the Houston YWCA Board members, though, participated in such organizations as the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching and the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. One result of their

attempts to facilitate greater interracial cooperation was the founding of a separate branch for Mexican-American women and girls, the Magnolia Park Branch.⁴ Further evaluation of programs led to a more drastic move in 1955 when the Houston YWCA led the city with its complete racial integration of the association's cafeteria.

Throughout the following two decades the Houston YWCA continued to deal with issues of racial discrimination as it helped to establish a "freedom school" for Mexican-American children, hosted the first national Chicana conference, and organized an African-American women's caucus prior to the National YWCA Conference held in Houston in 1970. Moreover, several of the women associated with the Houston YWCA Board of Directors were involved with the Houston Independent School District as it grappled with dictates to desegregate the city's public school system almost fifteen years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the Supreme Court. The experience gained by Houston YWCA members in the area of race relations often placed them in the forefront as "experts" on racial issues.

This study is an attempt to place the Houston YWCA within the larger context of the growth of Houston as a major metropolitan city in the southwestern region of the United States. Very little has been written on the history of Houston, in general, and much less on the role of a women's organization in that

⁴ Mexican-American women and girls were involved in YWCA programs prior to the founding of the Branch and YWCA women conducted citizenship classes for Mexican immigrants residing in Houston.

growth. Throughout the first ten years of its existence, the Houston YWCA offered many of the same programs as most other YWCAs across the country. In addition, Houston city leaders considered the local association to be a model for other local women's voluntary organizations.

The Houston YWCA helped to fill a void in social services during the early years of the twentieth century. Many of the women's clubs appealed to the more wealthy, established women of the community and most of the early social service agencies only dealt with the "at risk" women and girls, i.e., those either homeless, pregnant, or both. The programs offered by the Houston YWCA fit with the more "progressive" attitude assumed by city leaders during those early decades. The local association appeared to enhance the overall appeal of the city without threatening any major institutions, individuals, or the racial status quo.

Although numerous studies have explored the relationship between various white city YWCAs and their African-American branches, very little has been written on how a city association dealt with the overall race situation in an urban setting. African-American YWCA members' use of the association's swimming pool in the 1940s and the full racial integration of the YWCA cafeteria in 1955 are only a small part of the changes made by the local association that reverberated throughout the city.

The Blue Triangle Branch of the Houston YWCA served the needs of the Houston African-American community for eighty years.⁵ More importantly, however, it provided a conduit for interracial cooperation in a city with a large but segregated African-American population. White members of the YWCA Board of Directors and African-American members of the Blue Triangle Committee of Management carried on a very tenuous relationship throughout the history of the branch. Oftentimes the white women sitting on the YWCA Board found it difficult to move beyond societal expectations regarding race relations.

In addition, a study of the Houston YWCA provides a brief glimpse into developing race relations in Houston among Latinos and whites in the city. No YWCA study to date has explored the history of a Mexican-American branch of a city association and the relationship between the Mexican-American women and a predominantly white central association Board of Directors.

Although studies have focused on the role religion has played in the work of the YWCA, very little has been written about the relationship between a local YWCA and the Community Chest/United Fund/United Way. In this study, the issue of funding for YWCA programs will be a central focus. The emergence of the Houston YWCA in 1907, just a few years prior to the organization of the Houston Community Chest, means that the local association only operated a short time prior to coming under the influence of the Chest. As it established itself as a legitimate women's organization in the city, the local association found

⁵ The Houston YWCA began operating the Blue Triangle Branch in 1919 and it continued until 1999 when the branch ceased its affiliation with the YWCA.

itself caught between pleasing the National Board of the YWCA and its local funding source. In order to evaluate the criticism directed at the National YWCA for its stance on race in the South, it is imperative to understand the relationship of the local association to the larger metropolitan population and its available source for operating funds. Relinquishing direct control of fund raising often meant modifying the association's stance on potentially volatile issues as well as having to take on projects that did not necessarily fit into the YWCA program.

Researching the dependence of city associations upon local citizens for operating funds provides an interesting perspective from which to explore the impact of a women's organization on the city and conversely, the expectations of city leaders, as well as citizens, regarding the acceptable actions of women. If it gained the support of influential members of the community, the local association appeared to gain access to a wider pool from which to draw monetary support. Citywide endorsement of programs could also translate into a stronger political voice for women.

In addition to Community Chest/United Fund monies, the Houston YWCA also received federal monies during the 1960s and 1970s through the Great Society programs of the Johnson administration. The local association's plans for the monies, at times, conflicted with goals city officials. Whether the funds originated with a local fund drive or through federal programs, the Houston YWCA often found itself bowing to the dictates of male program officials.

The years covered by this study are significant. As mentioned previously, the Houston YWCA organized in January 1907, a time that coincided with the formation of the National Board of the YWCA in December of 1906. The merging of the student-oriented branch of the YWCA and the city associations helped to bring issues of race to the forefront very early in the 1900s. The Houston YWCA organized as the relationship of the student groups and the city associations began to develop. No city or student YWCA existed in Houston prior to 1907, and therefore, the local association did not have to break through layers of baggage once it began its work with African-American women and girls.

The closing date for the study is significant, in part, because the National YWCA experienced another transformation in its position on women's rights during the late 1960s and early 1970s. An initial supporter of protective legislation and an opponent of the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1910s and 1920s, the YWCA later became a proclaimed member of the women's movement and a proponent of the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment during the 1970s. Houston's hosting of the first International Women's Year Conference in 1977 places the local association squarely in the middle of the re-emerging feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

A focus on the Houston YWCA's role as an advocate for women's rights helps to bring into focus the status of women in the city and what role women played in the development of the city. The local association progressed through the years from an organization that relied on male assistance with fund raising to

an active women's rights advocate. During the first ten to fifteen years of its existence in Houston, the YWCA had very little difficulty maintaining its position as a separate women's organization. The city "fathers" exhibited a very paternalistic attitude toward the YWCA women, and the Board of Directors' minutes do not indicate any difficulty on the part of Board members in maintaining that relationship. City leaders were often willing to support an all-women's organization that catered to the needs of young women arriving in the city.

The resources available for a study of the Houston YWCA provide some difficulties as they relate to the "women's voices" available for the researcher. The Houston YWCA Board members took meticulous notes and constructed elaborate scrapbooks to pass on a history of the association's work. What is missing, however, oftentimes speaks as loudly as the materials saved by the Board members. Although the Blue Triangle Branch after 1920 operated under the direction of its own Committee of Management, there are no records available as they relate to the inner workings of the Committee. Information regarding Branch activities and needs were related to the Board of Directors through the "Colored Branch" secretary who, for the first twenty years, was a white woman. Oftentimes information regarding Branch activities, as noted in the official Board minutes, consisted of one or two lines stating the popularity of a particular program or the concerns of the Board that the Branch learn to operate within its budget.

The same is true for the Magnolia Park Branch of the Houston YWCA. No records exist within the YWCA collection dealing with the formation of the Branch or activities sponsored by the Branch. The only events that were covered somewhat extensively in the Board of Directors' minutes were the hosting of a national Chicana conference and the sponsoring of job fairs.

Other voices missing from the study include the voices of the employed staff members of the Houston YWCA. The YWCA is referred to as a voluntary association, but only the Board of Directors can be considered voluntary. Women providing direction of YWCA programs were all paid staff members. Many of those staff members came from regions of the country outside of the South. Very few references are included in the Board minutes as to the paid staff members except when one of the women resigned from her position. Discussions did occur relating to salaries, vacation time, and retirement, but the women themselves generally did not sit in on the Board of Director meetings. One exception seems to be that of Thelma Mills, the Executive Director of the Metropolitan association during the tumultuous years of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Mills served for many years as the Executive Director, and some of her correspondence relating to the racial integration of the cafeteria remains in the YWCA collection. Those women dealing directly with the paid members and program participants reported to the Executive Director who then relayed their ideas and concerns to the women on the Board.

Thus, the focus of the study must remain on the members of the Houston YWCA Board of Directors. How did they perceive their role as the leaders of the city association over the years? Although the makeup of the Board changed frequently, the class and racial breakdown remained fairly consistent over the course of the study. The Board minutes provide glimpses into what the Board members believed important on both a local and national level, whether it be the importance of decorating for a Christmas social, the inclusion of the United States in the League of Nations, or the speed at which the nation should embrace the dictates of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

Board minutes also give a microcosmic view of life in Houston and the role women played in the growth of the city. For example, by advocating the exclusion of night work for women in the frozen custard and root beer stands during the 1920s, the local association took a stand regarding proper female behavior in Houston. The insistence by the Community Chest that the Houston YWCA involve itself in helping to alleviate the juvenile delinquency problem provides insights into social problems of both the 1920s and 1950s and how civic leaders determined it to be the duty of a women's organization to stem the growth of female juvenile delinquency. And the role assumed by the local YWCA in providing assistance to women during the depression (and its later supervision of projects associated with the Great Society programs of the Johnson administration) illustrate social difficulties within the city and the role women needed to play in helping to make Houston a "progressive" southern city.

Questions needing to be addressed in order to understand fully the actions of the Houston YWCA, as viewed through the eyes of its Board of Directors, include what role did the YWCA believe to be important as it attempted to serve the African-American and Latino communities in Houston? Did the interracial cooperation among the white, Mexican-American, and African-American YWCA members extend outward into the minority communities through the branches, or did the branches develop into significant community centers in spite of the actions of the Board of Directors? Did the fluctuating economic support from the Community Chest/United Fund hinder or facilitate the growth of actual interracial cooperation on the part of the YWCA and its African-American and Mexican-American branches? And did the expectations placed upon the local association by civic leaders play the major role in determining the programs of the Houston YWCA or did the Board members look to serve the interests of its constituents with little regard for the reactions of its funding source?

Historian Anne Firor Scott noted in her work, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History*, that women's associations had traditionally been the "prolific builders of vital community institutions." She noted that those institutions included schools, parks, playgrounds, health clinics, and houses of refuge. For the YWCA, many of those same services were housed within the local YWCA buildings or on YWCA property. Scott also noted that women's organizations, at times, operated as an early warning system within the community, identifying problem areas and bringing them to the attention of those

possessing the political power to ameliorate the problems.⁶ Does this description hold true for the Houston YWCA?

One other point made by Scott was that a gulf often “separated what the national board thought the local units were doing and what they were really doing.”⁷ An examination of National YWCA publications and directives to the local association, through the Board of Directors, and the Board members’ discussions on how to implement the changes provides an insight into the tug of war that often takes place between a national women’s association and the communities in which they operate. As will be seen in the case of the Houston YWCA, the differences in approaching controversial issues could be dramatic.

In order to appreciate more fully the actions of the Houston YWCA Board of Directors, one must first understand the background of the national and Houston YWCAs.

⁶ Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women’s Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND ON THE NATIONAL AND HOUSTON YWCAS

Emerging during a time when women's voluntary organizations flourished in the United States, the Young Women's Christian Association was in many ways an organization operated by middle- and upper-class women attempting to provide assistance and guidance for young employed women. The approach taken by the association is often described by historians as maternalistic. By utilizing the religious fervor of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the women of the YWCA Boards of Directors were able to run an organization by women and for women without challenging any social status quo. Participation in the YWCA at the Board of Directors level allowed middle- and upper-class women an opportunity to offer a service to the city as well as to employed women and girls.

In order to understand fully the undertakings of the Houston YWCA Board of Directors during the first two decades of the twentieth century, one needs to be familiar with the program emphases of the larger national organization. It is also important to recognize the perception of the association by local citizens and civic leaders. Many YWCAs across the country originally appealed to the local citizens for yearly funds needed to offer their programs, and the success of the annual capital campaign drives depended on maintaining a good relationship with those donating the money. When appealing to the local citizens for monies,

city YWCAs often publicized the programs that benefited the city as well as women. Publicity for capital campaigns often mentioned the number of girls housed by the association's residence, programs assisting women's educational endeavors, whether they be the desires to develop business skills or homemaking skills, and the "wholesome" recreational opportunities offered in a supervised environment. For some associations, though, the process of appealing directly to local citizens for operating funds changed with the emergence of the Community Chest across the country.

The beginnings of the Community Chest in many cities throughout the nation brought about changes for many voluntary organizations, not just the YWCA. As the drive for donations moved out of the hands of the individual organizations and into the hands of a centralized committee responsible for raising and distributing donations from citizens to local social service organizations, the local groups requesting the funds had to elaborate on the importance of their work to a different group of people.

For the Houston YWCA, the first fifteen years of its existence in the city had the association operating on its own and outside the jurisdiction of a funding agency overseeing its activities. The primary concerns for the Houston YWCA Board of Directors were how to incorporate national YWCA initiatives into the city and how to raise the funds to keep the association solvent.

The history of the YWCA in the United States can be traced back to the Ladies' Christian Union, formed at New York University in 1850, and the Boston

Young Women's Christian Association that came into being in 1866. The women associated with the Ladies' Christian Union considered the Christian welfare of young women and girls to be of utmost importance. From the beginning, the women working as volunteers with the very early YWCAs focused their attention on the young employed woman. Early duties for the volunteers often included helping young YWCA women secure employment, as well as proper boarding within the urban industrial areas. Women serving on local governing boards quite often felt it most important to help mold women's character through the facilitation of Bible classes, encouraging church attendance, and surrounding the young women with what Board members believed to be proper Christian influences.¹ Moving beyond Bible study classes and lodging facilities, the early YWCAs began offering job training programs, cafeterias, and educational classes aimed at helping women and girls improve themselves physically, morally, and spiritually.

An emphasis on religion remained very strong for at least the first fifty years of the YWCA's existence. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a woman wishing to join the YWCA had to provide proof of membership in an evangelical Protestant Church. Those not belonging to an

¹ For a comprehensive history of the national association, see Elizabeth Wilson, *Fifty Years of Association Work Among Young Women, 1866–1916* (New York: National Board of the Young Women's Christian Association of the United States of America, 1916) or Mary Sims, *History of a Social Institution: The Young Women's Christian Association* (New York: Woman's Press, 1936).

evangelical Protestant church could become associate, non-voting members of the YWCA if they provided references attesting to their good moral character.²

As it moved into the twentieth century, the Young Women's Christian Association became part of an ever-increasing social gospel movement. The social gospel movement thrived in the United States from the late 1880s through the first two decades of the 1900s. Leaders built the movement upon a belief in the imminence of God, the goodness of man, and the coming of the kingdom of God. Those who adhered to social gospel principles believed that through the good will of men and women, social harmony would prevail and social injustices would be eliminated. The growing impersonal nature of industry at the turn of the century provided a challenge to social gospel adherents. The YWCA's exposure to employed women and girls led it to develop a more social interpretation of Christianity along the lines of the social gospel movement. Programs offered by city YWCAs embraced the precepts of the social gospel and extended them to young women and girls.

The YWCA continued striving to meet the needs of employed women when it adopted the "Social Ideals of the Churches" at its Sixth Annual Convention in 1920. The Federal Council of Churches proposed the "Social Ideals" in the United States in 1908 and the document included the promotion of measures such as arbitration in work-related problems, abolition of child labor,

² Numerous studies have explored the role of religion in the YWCA. For more information on the religious focus of the YWCA see Grace H. Wilson, *The Religious and Educational Philosophy of the Young Women's Christian Association* (New York: Columbia University Teachers College, 1933).

the advancement of a shorter workday, and the abatement of poverty. Of special importance to the YWCA were the proposals for an eight-hour work day and the prohibition of night work for women. With increasing growth in YWCA membership among business, professional, and industrial women, the national association found itself speaking out more forcefully on the needs for protective legislation for women in the workplace. The YWCA was not alone, as many other women's organizations during the Progressive Era adopted similar stances to the YWCA's in relation to women's employment. The city YWCAs began adapting older programs and developing new ones to better meet the needs of women members.³

Although it often spoke on behalf of employed women in the United States and understood the importance of women's voices in society, the National Board of the YWCA did not publicly advance the acquisition of the right to vote for women in the 1910s. The association did, however, view the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment as an impetus for the promotion of women's involvement in the political affairs of the community, state, and nation. During the 1920s, the YWCA began offering training programs in citizenship that led to the publication of materials on social legislation. The National Board believed that the association should use its resources to prepare women to assume their rightful positions as responsible citizens, directing their energies toward achieving "social righteousness." The interconnections of the social gospel and the granting of

³ Robert T. Handy, *The Social Gospel in America, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 10-13.

women the right to vote in many ways empowered the YWCA on the national front. The “protective” legacy continued with the YWCA into the 1920s and formed the basis of the association’s opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment proposed by Alice Paul and the National Women’s Party in 1923.

At the same time that it sought a greater voice for women and advocated changes in the relationship between industry and women, the National Board began developing a stronger program for African-American women and girls. The stated purpose of the YWCA proclaimed that the organization existed for all women and girls. The practice of racial inclusiveness, though, caused the national YWCA great concerns and the National Board proceeded very slowly and cautiously through the early years of the twentieth century.

African-American women’s involvement with the YWCA began on a segregated basis with the first “colored” Young Women’s Christian Association organized in Dayton, Ohio, in 1893.⁴ Race became a potentially divisive issue during the early 1900s as the two separate divisions of the YWCA, the International Board and the American Committee, merged in December of 1906. Existing African-American YWCAs were able to affiliate with the International Board prior to the merger but after 1907, the newly-formed National Board accepted segregated colored YWCAs as branch members only. The impetus for

⁴ The term “colored” denoted programs for African-American women and girls from the 1890s through the first twenty years of the next century. It will be used to denote specific programs offered by the YWCA for African Americans when appropriate. The term “secretary” also denotes the official title of YWCA employees holding director of program positions.

the branch affiliation originated with the increasing number of southern association members who had stronger feelings regarding African-American women's involvement with the YWCA. Although it established the first colored YWCA in 1893, the national association did not hire its first "colored work" secretary with responsibilities for the YWCA clubs in African-American schools throughout the country until 1909. It took five more years before the national staff hired a secretary for colored work in city associations. Work with African-American women and girls became more prominent during World War I as the YWCA set aside money from the War Work Fund to develop a larger Colored YWCA program.⁵

The Houston YWCA emerged during this period of reorganization and expansion on the part of the national association and during a period of incredible growth for the city of Houston. Increases in industry along the Gulf Coast led to an influx of individuals seeking employment in local mills, factories, office buildings, and warehouses. Women as well as men traveled to Houston seeking employment opportunities. Advertised wage work for women included positions as stenographers, sales clerks, laundry employees, telegraph operators, teachers, and mill operatives. As was typical in most southern cities, most of the traditionally female occupations were often reserved for white women. Houston's population in the early twentieth century included a significant

⁵ Dorothy Salem, *To Better Our World: Black Women in Organized Reform, 1890 – 1920* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1990), p. 47.

number of African Americans. Yet, Jim Crow segregation often relegated African-American women to positions in the laundries or as domestic servants.

The population boom experienced by the city in the early twentieth century led to the organization of numerous clubs, associations, and agencies to meet the needs of a diverse citizenry. As city leaders began contemplating the development of what they hoped would become the premier southern port city in the nation, the need to expand social services in the city became a primary concern. Prior to a fully developed social service program, most charity and benevolent work fell on the shoulders of established men's and women's clubs as well as church groups. Many such clubs and organizations operated in the city during the early 1900s, with most appealing to middle or upper-class women who had the leisure time to devote to reading, playing musical instruments, and raising funds for local charities.

One of the women's organizations formed in the city was the Houston Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The Houston WCTU began operating a boarding home in Houston in 1905 to serve self-supporting women and girls traveling to the city. After only a year of operation, the women associated with the WCTU recognized a need for a more extensive program to meet the concerns of the rapidly increasing population of employed women in the city. It was the persistence of the early Houston WCTU members in petitioning the national YWCA for the establishment of a city association in Houston that finally brought the YWCA to the city. For WCTU members, the founding of a

YWCA in the city would mean that young women and girls would be offered more than just suitable living accommodations. The YWCA would provide leisure time activities, educational programs, an affordable cafeteria for working women, and guidance for young women and girls out on their own for the first time.⁶

The National Board responded to the WCTU's petition and sent representatives to Houston to set the wheels in motion for the first city association in the southwestern region of the United States. The chartering of the new Houston YWCA in 1907 led to an immediate transfer of WCTU lodging and cafeteria services from the WCTU and the Women's Rest Room Association (part of the Houston Improvement League) to the new YWCA. The Willard Association, women who made up the residence committee of the Houston WCTU, became members of the Houston YWCA in 1908 and Willard Association members became the first YWCA residence committee. The boarding facility operated by the new YWCA housed both permanent (those staying longer than a month) and transient women. Although the WCTU remained active in Houston, the YWCA took over the preventive work initiated by the former organization, particularly regarding women's lodging needs. Other programs developed quickly and by the end of 1908, the Houston YWCA offered a women's residence

⁶ Mrs. V. M. Baines, *The Story of the Texas White Ribboners* (Houston: n.p., 1935), p. 78. HMRC

facility, cafeteria, rest rooms, recreational programs, noon meetings in the workplace, and a gymnasium.⁷

Although the early Houston YWCA offered programs consistent with National Board programs, it is also important to elaborate how the association fit in the developmental plans of the city. Numerous areas need to be explored and questions need to be asked to determine the role the early YWCA played in city development. First, what services did the YWCA offer from 1907 through the 1920s that directly benefited the Houston? Secondly, what role did influential members of the Houston YWCA Board of Directors play in keeping the association walking a fine line between appeasing the National Board as well as local civic leaders? Thirdly, how did the YWCA's participation in the newly developed Houston Community Chest affect its position within the community at large? By focusing on these three questions, one gains a greater understanding of the role of women in city development and social reform, the often-debated power and influence exerted by women during the Progressive Era, and the role funding played in the activities of a southern women's voluntary association.

From 1900 to 1920, very few boarding facilities for women operated in Houston. Women found themselves lodging with families who took in boarders

⁷ Frances Willard organized the Houston Woman's Christian Temperance Union at the Shearn Methodist Church in 1893. See Baines, *The Story of the Texas White Ribboners*, 78. There is also some indication that the Women's Rest Room Association attempted to attract the attention of the state YWCA offices at approximately the same time as the Houston WCTU. A copy of a letter drafted to the women of Houston by the Women's Rest Room Association is included in the YWCA Collection at the HMRC.

or in boarding homes where both men and women resided. As the population of Houston increased, the demand for women's housing increased. Local estimates suggest that in 1913, over six thousand women worked in the Houston mills, factories, laundries, department stores, and offices.⁸ Wages for women, though, remained low forcing women to sometimes seek boarding in what many women reformers considered to be less than satisfactory accommodations. In an effort to alleviate the unsatisfactory accommodations for women, the Houston YWCA began offering rooms at weekly rates that accommodated the meager budgets of the numerous employed women. Even though the cost of residing at the YWCA was very affordable, the boarding facility was not an instant success as the association had some difficulty convincing young employed women that the YWCA was not a charity. The local association also had to prove to women that living at the YWCA residence would not force them to relinquish their freedom and independence. It did not take long for the association to accomplish its aim and during the 1920s the residence continued to be filled to capacity.⁹

The continued growth of Houston and the subsequent influx of women looking for employment caused the Houston YWCA to make plans to expand its residence capabilities in 1915. During the 1910s, the association had to turn away women seeking lodging on a regular basis and even took to housing some

⁸ "Girls Are Opposed to False Boosting," [unattributed source, n.d.] in Scrapbook pages, 1913 Folder, Houston YWCA Collection, HMRC.

⁹ Interview with Mary McDowall, first President of the Houston YWCA, in *Federation Tales* (January 1926), Houston YWCA Collection, HMRC.

of the women on the screened porch of the YWCA residence.¹⁰ Although civic leaders endorsed the expansion of YWCA facilities, the plans for a new residence hit a snag as the United States entered World War I and the focus of the entire city shifted to war work. In 1920, the local YWCA began planning again for the construction of a new boarding facility. The contributions of the association during the war and the YWCA's plans for program expansion pleased civic leaders to the extent that after the war, some of the most wealthy and influential men in the city agreed to head the capital campaign drive. The 1920 campaign drive raised over \$800,000 for the purpose of erecting a new housing facility along with a new activities center. The new YWCA activities center opened in 1922 and the new residence opened in 1924.

The YWCA home played an important role in the development of the city as well as the life of the women residing at the residence. The large numbers of women continuing to arrive in Houston seeking employment during the 1920s concerned city leaders. Lodging at the YWCA meant that women were afforded safe and supervised housing while allowing them to participate in wholesome recreational activities. The larger home meant that greater numbers of young women came under the influence of the YWCA. The young women also found staying at the YWCA to be advantageous. Women boarders had their medical

¹⁰ Velma Sumrall private notes in preparation of the publication of *Fifty Golden Years: The Young Women's Christian Association of Houston* (Houston: Young Women's Christian Association, 1957). Notes can be found in the Houston YWCA Collection, HMRC.

needs attended to by the YWCA residence matron.¹¹ Since the room rates charged by the local association were based on the actual wages of the women rather than the expenses incurred by the organization, many women could afford to stay at the YWCA.¹² The local YWCA Board of Directors could survey the average wages offered within the city but the National Board of the YWCA established guidelines governing wage limits for those residing in the boarding facilities in order to ensure that the association provided housing for the poorer paid woman employee.

The lack of suitable recreation was another area of concern for both city leaders and women's organizations. YWCA recreational programs provided an alternative to the ever-popular dance halls. Business girls clubs, residence patrons, and association members all had access to a wide variety of recreational activities. Women associated with the Houston YWCA believed that recreation and physical education helped to strengthen both the body and the

¹¹ When a boarder became ill, it was the duty of the residence matron to keep abreast of the details, serve meals in the woman's room, and summon proper medical help if needed. When the influenza epidemic of 1917-1918 hit Houston, YWCA boarders fared better than most and many attribute the success to the care of the residence matron. See the BOD minutes from the time period as well as the booklet, *Fifty Golden Years of the Houston YWCA*. HMRC

¹² Board minutes and residence records indicate that the local association adjusted the residence wage limits often to accommodate as many women as possible. For the most part, though, room rates remained low to provide for lesser-paid women employees.

mind. The local association offered swimming, tennis, hiking, and horseback riding clubs as well as “play days” at the YWCA playgrounds.¹³

One of the most critically acclaimed offerings of the Houston YWCA was the Travelers’ Aid Program. The Travelers’ Aid (TA) Department offered aid to young women arriving in the city, particularly assisting them with advice regarding appropriate lodging and giving directions to various locations throughout the city. Travelers’ Aid Departments were common in many of the YWCAs across the country during the early 1900s. Although begun in England in 1865, Travelers’ Aid Societies were not established in the United States until 1903. At that time, the Travelers’ Aid Society in the United States operated under the direction of Grace Dodge, who in December 1906 became the first President of the National Board of the YWCA.¹⁴

Much of the impetus for the establishment of Travelers’ Aid Societies stemmed from national reports revealing an alarming number of women disappearing each year, presumably lured into prostitution and white slavery.

¹³ The YWCA playgrounds were open to the public on weekdays but reserved for the use of women and girls on weekends. See “YWCA Will Provide Playgrounds for Girls” [unattributed source, n.d.], in Scrapbook Pages, 1913 Folder, Houston YWCA Collection, HMRC.

¹⁴ For an historical sketch of the Travelers’ Aid Society, see Bertha McCall, *History of the National Travelers’ Aid Association, 191 –1948* (n.p., 1950). The document is in the possession of the Travelers’ Aid International located in Washington, D.C. The author is grateful to the organization for the use of those materials. Also, the responsibilities of Travelers’ Aid workers can be found in Orin C. Baker, *Travelers’ Aid Society in America: Principles and Methods* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1917). Information on Grace Dodge can be found in Marion O. Robinson, *Eight Women of the YWCA* (New York: National Board of the Young Women’s Christian Association, 1966).

Although the reports primarily contained statistics for large cities such as Chicago and New York, the tremendous growth spurt experienced by Houston caused civic leaders and women's organizations to fear similar problems and to take action.¹⁵ The local Travelers' Aid Department of the Houston YWCA operated under the guidance of the local Board of Directors from 1910 through 1916, and then it functioned as an independent organization from 1916 through the 1920s. The Houston YWCA, during that time, continued to provide assistance but did not provide the sole monetary support for the program.

Records kept by the Travelers' Aid Department of the local association indicate that numerous organizations within the city supported the work of the department. Many women's clubs and church organizations provided financial assistance for the TA Department. After the YWCA relinquished financial responsibility for the program, the Houston Federation deemed it important enough to the orderly growth of the city to continue its funding until the Houston Travelers' Aid Society could come under the control of the Houston Social Service Agency.¹⁶

Notebooks maintained by the YWCA illustrate the numerous tasks assumed by the Travelers' Aid secretary and showed the job to be very

¹⁵ McCall, *History of the National Travelers' Aid Association, 1911–1948*.

¹⁶ BOD minutes, January 10, 1915. The early minutes of the Travelers' Aid Committee include a listing of women's clubs in Houston that contributed to the funding of the Travelers' Aid secretary. The Houston Federation was organized in 1915 to handle bequests to the city. Money left to the city would be distributed to needy organizations. Records of the Houston Federation can be found at the University of Houston Library.

exhausting. The TA secretary's primary function was to protect the well being of the young girls arriving in Houston. TA secretaries patrolled the train stations, assisted with luggage and tickets, and remained on the lookout for "loafers" and procurers. In other words, the Travelers' Aid Department provided a welcoming service in the city of Houston and a friendly face for women traveling alone. The YWCA also used the department to broadcast programs offered by the association to newcomers.

Another interesting aspect of the Travelers' Aid department involved the use of placards placed in train stations that gave information not only about the YWCA, but also about the local shopping district. Printed materials circulated to the outlying communities in the Houston area and the advertising benefited local businesses. The service was good for the YWCA and it was good for business. The local press praised the work done by the Travelers' Aid Department, calling it one of the most important branches of the Houston YWCA.¹⁷

In addition to boarding facilities and travel assistance, the Houston association offered a cafeteria that catered to employed women. The YWCA cafeteria was one of the earliest services offered by the Houston association and through the years became one of the better-known services offered to locally-employed women, although men also frequented the facility. Since women's wages were often substantially lower than their male counterparts, the YWCA

¹⁷ Lovick Pierce, "Safeguarding the Girls Who Come Through the Gates," [unattributed source, n.d.], Scrapbook Pages, 1913 folder, Houston YWCA Collection, HMRC.

cafeteria strived to keep prices low enough to be affordable for the poorly paid woman employee and still provide a profit for the association.¹⁸ The cafeteria had the distinction of being the only self-supporting program offered by the local association. The number of patrons being served by the YWCA cafeteria on a monthly basis attested to the success of the program. By 1912, the cafeteria served an average of 4,500 patrons per month at an average of eighteen cents per meal. The patronage of the cafeteria increased to such a level that the Houston YWCA Board of Directors continued seeking larger cafeteria facilities until it was able to occupy its major cafeteria facility at 506 San Jacinto in 1925.¹⁹

Each of the aforementioned services required the work of several paid as well as volunteer staff members. During the first year, volunteer Board members did most of the work themselves including cooking and serving meals in the cafeteria. The initial success of the Houston YWCA fell on the shoulders of the early Board of Directors. Members' zeal for their work was evident when reading monthly Board minutes and noting the amount of time dedicated to the work of running a cafeteria and overseeing the operation of a residence and an activities center. Many of the women sitting on the YWCA Board of Directors had a direct tie to Houston business and civic leaders including some of the more wealthy

¹⁸ "YWCA Reviews Its Work and Plans for a Busy Year," January 29, 1914 [unattributed source], in Scrapbook Pages, 1914 Folder, Houston YWCA Collection, HMRC.

¹⁹ "National and Local Y.W.C.A. History," included in the Houston YWCA Collection, HMRC.

and influential families in the lumber and oil industries, in banking, and in the legal profession.

Mary McDowall became the first president of the Houston YWCA in 1907. Her sister married Thomas W. House, a member of the well-known Houston banking family. Mrs. Louise (Harris) Masterson served as President of the Board of Directors off and on for over twenty years and served on various committees for many more. Her husband was a prominent judge in Houston. Florence Sterling, sister of Frank and Ross Sterling of Humble (Exxon) Oil, also had ties to the local association and deep roots in Houston.²⁰ For the first twenty years of its existence, the prestige of the women Board members allowed for the financial success of the local association

Many of the documents in the YWCA from the first ten years of the association's existence stress the protective aspects of YWCA work. The Board members often referred to the work of the YWCA as "preventive." Board minutes also frequently mentioned the "girls" in the programs even though many of the YWCA members were employed women living on their own. Although the YWCA would begin offering activities to younger teenage girls by the late 1910s and 1920s, it was hard to distinguish between the two groups when reading the Board members' comments in the monthly minutes.

²⁰ The Houston YWCA had two Mrs. Harris Mastersons serving as President of the association. Louise Masterson, a founding member of the Houston YWCA served off and on from 1907 through the early 1920s. Carol Sterling Masterson, for whom the Masterson Branch of the Houston YWCA was named, married Harris Masterson III, the nephew of Louise Masterson.

Disagreements sometimes surfaced during the 1920s between the dues-paying members of the Houston YWCA and the volunteer Board of Directors and had to do with the failure of the Board to understand the needs of industrial, as well as business and professional women, regarding labor issues. The increasing numbers of minority women and industrial workers participating in YWCA programs during the late 1910s and 1920s also contributed to clashes between the local volunteer Board of Directors and its paid secretaries. Visiting National Board secretaries commented on the lack of interaction between local Board members and paying YWCA members in the city. Oftentimes the departmental secretaries, who were paid employees, got caught between women members and women sitting on the Board. Evidence from local Board of Directors' minutes expressed a need to "protect" the young women of the association although the women YWCA members did not feel the need to be protected or mothered. Reports also exist regarding attempts by various YWCA clubs trying to vocalize their needs and desires that often conflicted with those of the local Board members. Many of the differences involved definitions of appropriate behavior of women and what constituted acceptable recreation for young women. For example, a disagreement regarding the hosting of mixed-sex dances continued for almost a year as women associated with numerous YWCA clubs appealed to the Board for permission to make their own decisions regarding YWCA activities.

Throughout the 1910s, though, the Houston YWCA appeared to operate smoothly. Successful annual campaign drives allowed the association to expand its programs offered to women and allowed the association to hire more secretaries to handle the newly created departments and activities. In addition to the Travelers' Aid department, one of the more well-known additions to the Houston YWCA that benefited women, as well as the city, was the YWCA Employment Bureau that began operating in the 1910s.²¹ A city employment bureau existed in 1910 but until 1922 it only provided assistance to men. Until that time, the YWCA's employment bureau was the only one serving women in the city. Responsibilities of the employment bureau secretaries not only included interviewing prospective female employees, but also going out to the businesses in Houston to determine the availability of jobs. Phone calls regarding employment could go in either direction. The prospective employer could call the YWCA in search of a potential employee or the association could call the potential employer if it deemed it had an acceptable applicant for an available position. The program became so popular and so widely used that Galveston

²¹ It is hard to pinpoint the actual starting date of the Houston YWCA Employment Bureau because the collection only contains Board minutes for the years 1907, 1908, 1909, 1913, and 1914. The information provided for those years is very minimal. Most of the information available for the time period 1901–1913 comes from newspaper articles and records from other agencies. The Houston YWCA Board of Directors kept very detailed and meticulous scrapbooks with multiple copies of every press release included in the local newspapers.

businesses referred Galveston women, left without work after a 1915 hurricane, to the Houston YWCA Employment Bureau.²²

Each of the programs offered by the Houston YWCA aimed to allow middle-class women a way to maintain their respectability while living and working outside of the home.²³ Throughout the 1920s, the Board of Directors continued to stress the “preventive” nature of the YWCA program. The association did not view itself as a “remedial” organization. Prior to the 1920s, no one really questioned the mission or the programs of the local association. Rather, the association garnered much praise from both civic leaders and the local press. When the YWCA shifted gears to focus on war work from 1917 through 1919, the various programs offered to the city and to the national government brought the association additional attention and praise.²⁴

²² BOD Minutes, April 24, 1916.

²³ The term “middle-class” can be defined in many ways. Historian Nell Irvin Painter argues that class is a fluid category, particularly as it relates to the middle class. Although income and relation to production are often indicators of class standing, for the middle class, identity and respectability are also important factors to be considered. That is particularly true for women of the early 20th century who worked in office jobs and as teachers. The Board minutes for the Houston YWCA indicate a recognition on the part of Board members that the women staying at the YWCA residence and participating in YWCA programs were more closely associated with the middle class. The programs were aimed at helping young women maintain their respectability, thus the statement that the YWCA programs were “preventive” rather than “reformative.” See Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 187–1919* (New York, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1987), p. xxiv.

²⁴ Baines, *World War*. Also, “Inaugurate Move for New Y.W.C.A. Home in Houston,” *Houston Post*, January 29, 1919, HMRC.

During the World War I years, the Houston YWCA organized groups to sew and knit, staffed a Hostess House for soldiers at Camp Logan, conducted lectures on morality, and organized Patriotic Leagues for girls that aimed to keep them busy and away from the soldiers. The national government called upon the YWCA to work with several other organizations, including the Young Men's Christian Association to provide programs for young people, particularly in areas housing large numbers of soldiers. Programs such as the Patriotic League had a two-fold purpose. They were to keep young women busy and contributing to the war effort and they were to cut down on the spread of sexually-transmitted disease. The U.S. government became acutely aware of the poor physical health of many of its recruits and feared the spread of sexually transmitted diseases to soldiers. Girls and women affiliated with the Patriotic Leagues promised to remain chaste as they participated in YWCA war programs.²⁵

The 1920s, though, ushered in new attitudes that affected the work of the local YWCA. Although the association raised the large amount of money needed for the construction of a new Activities Center and Residence, trouble loomed ahead. In particular, the establishment of the Houston Community Chest in 1922 signaled a change in the way civic leaders viewed the role of charities and other organizations soliciting funds from the community. One of the more important

²⁵ Sims, *History of a Social Institution*, 184. Also see Mrs. W. M. Baines, *World War*, 78. A brochure advertising a lecture series on sexually transmitted diseases is included in the Houston YWCA Scrapbook, 1916, Houston YWCA Collection, HMRC.

concerns for the newly-developed Chest was the prudent outlay of monies.²⁶ The new Community Chests were to be a clearinghouse for information regarding the various charities appealing for money from local citizens. They would ask the charities to account for the monies donated through the Chest and would determine the feasibility of the programs.

The formation of the Houston Community Chest, however, was not the first time the city attempted to exert some type of control over annual campaign drives from the various city organizations. City leaders actually attempted to centralize the work of charity and benevolence years earlier. Between 1901 and 1922, the city developed several social service organizations including the Houston Social Service Foundation (HSSF), the Houston Federation (HF), and the Houston Employment Bureau. The early HSSF concerned itself primarily with the handing out of assistance to the “deserving” poor.²⁷ The HSSF’s focus on men and families meant that the YWCA’s programs did not fit within the Foundation’s mission. The Houston Federation operated primarily as a repository of money bequeathed to the city.

Since it was the primary women’s “preventive” organization in the city, the YWCA found itself caught up in the concerns of civic leaders over problems with delinquency in the city. By 1914, Houston social service agencies had become

²⁶ “Annual Report of the Houston Community Chest, 1923.” HMRC.

²⁷ “A Year’s Work: March 1912-1913,” Houston Social Service Foundation.

alarmed with the number of “delinquent” girls in the city.²⁸ A study of female delinquency in Houston found the problem of delinquent girls to be much more difficult to deal with than male juvenile delinquency. Part of the difficulty appeared to be a lack of “innocent” amusements available for girls. The age at which students could officially leave school at the time was fourteen years and many involved in the various social service organizations believed that the ability to leave school at such an early age contributed to the delinquency problem.

Even before the YWCA became involved with the delinquency problem, the city approved of the construction of an Industrial School for Girls (ISG). The school stressed the teaching of domestic science (i.e., sewing and cooking) and the training of girls to become housewives and mothers. The girls assigned to the ISG did not receive any training in office work as the supporters of the school felt it unwise to train delinquent girls for office work.²⁹

The Houston YWCA and the Industrial School for Girls became intertwined during the early years of the school and the connection between the two entities provides some insights into problems that later emerge between the

²⁸ Female delinquency became a source of concern in the early 1900s and continued into the 1920s. See Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885–1920*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

²⁹ “Annual Report of the Social Service Federation, Houston, Texas, Year Ending March, 1914.” The Texas state legislature passed a bill in 1913 that provided for the establishment of a state Girls Training School with each county raising money to help supports its construction. Houston began operating its Industrial Girls School in 1914.

Houston Community Chest and the YWCA. Ennis Cargill served as the first Chairman of the Board for the ISG. Cargill became an outspoken critic of the YWCA on both the local and national level. Louise Masterson, the on-again, off-again President of the Houston YWCA Board of Directors, also sat on the Board of the ISG.³⁰ Cargill became affiliated with the Houston Community Chest after its formation and Masterson became the first woman to sit as a Community Chest trustee. The conflict centered on the differences between the early YWCA's connection to a remedial program involving delinquent girls and its insistence that the association's programs were "preventive" rather than "remedial" seems to have come back to haunt it in the late 1920s.³¹

The Houston YWCA believed that its clubs and activities "prevented" young girls from getting into trouble. The city's lack of proper amusements and the young age at which children left school meant that many fifteen to seventeen-year-old girls often ran about town with little to occupy their time. The association tried to suggest ways to alleviate the problem of juvenile delinquency, particularly in its support of raising the age at which children could leave school from fourteen to sixteen years of age. Louise Masterson became a strong supporter of the proposal and the Houston YWCA as a body came out in support of the effort. Until the schools changed the age at which children could leave

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Cargill believed the Houston YWCA, as one of the most prominent women's organizations in the city, should play a more substantial role in helping to curb juvenile delinquency.

school, the YWCA attempted to offer programs for younger girls that aimed to keep them off of the streets and away from inappropriate forms of recreation and amusement. The Girl Reserve Program began in 1918 and began recruiting members from younger girls in the local schools. The programs became very popular and by the 1920s, many city schools had their own Girl Reserve groups.³²

Throughout the early 1920s, the Houston YWCA's attempts to solve the delinquency problem through Girl Reserve programs and attempts to raise the age at which children could leave school appeared to be acceptable to the HSSF and civic leaders. All of that changed, however, with the establishment of the Community Chest. Membership in the Houston Community Chest signaled a change in the way the YWCA had to view the programs it offered to girls and young women. The association had to depend on a significant quota from the yearly Community Chest drive for its operating expenses and was therefore vulnerable to complaints from the Chest regarding the role the association played as an agent of social reform.

The Houston YWCA responded positively to the initial invitation to join the Community Chest. At the time it agreed to join, the association appeared to be riding a wave of popularity. What the association initially believed to be a blessing, though, became within the first five years of Chest membership

³² BOD minutes, November 5, 1927; February 3, 1928.

somewhat of a burden. In 1927, the Houston YWCA appeared to be second-guessing its decision to join the Community Chest.

Although it was a women's organization and had an all-female Board of Directors, the Houston YWCA decided to ask a male trustee of the YWCA and a businessman to represent it on the Community Chest board.³³ The women on the Board of Directors were women of wealth and influence in the community, but none sat as a Community Chest trustee until Louise Masterson assumed that position in 1923. At the same time that the Houston YWCA contemplated joining the Community Chest, the national association began investigating Community Chest participation on a national level.³⁴

As early as 1923, the local association began experiencing negative repercussions from joining the Community Chest. In that year the Chest failed to raise its full budget and asked the YWCA to accept a ten percent cut in funds.³⁵ The Houston YWCA, because of its participation in the Chest, could not hold a separate capital campaign to raise additional funds in support of its on-going programs. The association voiced its displeasure to the Chest but to no avail. The Community Chest responded to the YWCA's complaints by announcing that the Board of Directors needed to get more publicity out before the next Chest

³³ BOD minutes, January 26, 1921.

³⁴ BOD minutes, February 27, 1923.

³⁵ BOD minutes, March 27, 1923.

campaign.³⁶ From 1923 until 1927, the relationship between the Chest and the Houston YWCA continued to be strained.

Part of the problem stemmed from the criticism of Dr. J. W. Slaughter, a trustee of the Community Chest. Although he could be at times very supportive of the YWCA, Slaughter often criticized the inner workings of the local association, particularly in how the association spent its money. On numerous occasions, Louise Masterson appeared before the Chest to vindicate the position of the YWCA and to explain the financial obligations of the association. In September of 1925, the Community Chest requested to view the books of the YWCA, an action that went against the original agreement made between the two bodies. The request came on the heels of a YWCA report regarding the cost of offering a girl the “privileges and advantages” of YWCA membership.³⁷ The local YWCA Board of Directors did not balk at the request but felt pressured to prove to the Chest that it indeed had a place in the city social service network and that it was, for the most part, self-supporting.

Another critic of the YWCA, Bishop Clinton S. Quinn, voiced in 1927 additional complaints about the association. Quinn, a trustee of the Community Chest and a guest speaker at the Houston YWCA’s annual meeting of 1927, noted that the community had certain expectations of the YWCA that included the performance of social gospel work while at the same time developing a more

³⁶ BOD minutes, July 31, 1923.

³⁷ BOD minutes, September 18, 1925.

“native” leadership.³⁸ His displeasure focused on the primarily out of state paid secretaries of the local YWCA. Members of the Board of Directors tended to be native Houstonians, but most of the paid secretaries came from abroad.

The Houston Board of Directors, though, had no control over the placement of paid staff members within the organization. The National Board emphasized training of association secretaries at its Training School in New York City. After the National Training School experience, a secretary became ready for placement in one of the local associations. A city YWCA in need of a new secretary filed a request with the national office, which in turn, forwarded resumes of the top candidates to the city associations.³⁹ Thus many of the Houston secretaries came to the association from outside of the city and the state. The national YWCA wanted local secretaries to have uniform training and be qualified professionals rather than to hire local women who might be less competent in their knowledge of the association’s governing policies. The desire for trained professional staff, however, became a target for Quinn when he said that the community expected the YWCA to “work with the soul and express their loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ” while warning the association against “too much professionalism” in its work.⁴⁰

³⁸ BOD minutes, December 20, 1927.

³⁹ Elizabeth Wilson, *Fifty Years of Association Work*, p. 249.

⁴⁰ BOD minutes, December 20, 1927

Criticism of the Houston YWCA stemmed from a number of different issues. Most important, though, was the shift in emphasis of the Community Chest. A 1926 survey on child welfare and family casework within the city, sponsored by the Chest, aimed to improve services provided by Chest members. The results of the survey led to a shift in the Community Chest's focus toward funding more programs dealing with families and children.⁴¹ The Community Chest began allotting more monies to such organizations as the Depelchin Faith Home, Gulf Coast Children's Aid and Protective Society, and the Houston Social Service Bureau, while monetary support for the YWCA stagnated.⁴² YWCA programs, developed for a constituency of primarily self-supporting single women, did not fit as well into the new direction of the Community Chest.

Dependence on Community Chest funds placed the YWCA in the precarious position of striving to remain true to its national purpose while having to please an organization that provided the financial resources necessary for the operation of its programs. Although the Houston YWCA directed many of its programs toward helping the self-supporting girl or woman to maintain her position in society or to better her life, the Board soon determined that adaptation was necessary in order to satisfy Community Chest trustees.

⁴¹ Perry McCall, "A Progressive City," p. 71. Information on the survey can be found in the Community Chest's Annual Report of 1928, HMRC.

⁴² Each annual report of the Houston Community Chest outlined the amount of money allotted to each participating organization.

The issue of delinquency became the focus again in the mid-to-late 1920s. Fearful of upsetting the Chest, and as a response to criticism of the association's preventive work, the Houston YWCA conducted its own investigation into the causes of delinquency among Houston girls.⁴³ The investigation revealed that delinquency occurred among untutored and undereducated adolescent girls who did not wish to return to high school. The YWCA came into contact with those girls when they sought out the assistance of the association in securing employment. Although the YWCA encouraged them to return to school, the girls generally refused.⁴⁴

The Houston YWCA, in an attempt to address the problem of girls no longer in school, proposed that the local school district hire visiting teachers to tutor delinquent girls. In this way, the local association's suggestion gave the appearance of taking a proactive stance regarding the delinquency problem while maintaining the association's position regarding education. The Chest accepted the proposal of using visiting teachers and placed Louise Masterson in charge of securing the necessary teachers.

In April of 1928, the local association took another step in its fight against delinquency when it decided to push for prohibition of night street work for girls under the age of twenty. Young girls worked frozen custard and root beer stands on the city streets and the Houston YWCA went on record as opposing such

⁴³ BOD minutes, April 17, 1927.

⁴⁴ BOD minutes, December 20, 1927.

employment. Most of the girls worked for tips instead of regular pay. In May of 1928, the association took the initiative in recommending a city ordinance encouraging the cessation of employment of young girls in root beer and frozen custard stands late at night. The Houston YWCA sent a letter of protest to the City Secretary but the city took no action regarding the association's request.⁴⁵ As an additional insult, the local press published criticisms from the young women working in the custard and root beer stands. Many of the young women either depended on the night work for their livelihood or their families needed the additional funds.⁴⁶ The press made the YWCA appear insensitive to the needs of lower income families. By attempting to please the Chest and at the same time working to protect young women, the YWCA only added to its image problem.

The YWCA touted the success of the Girl Reserve program in Houston as a method of delinquency prevention. In January 1928, the local YWCA had more than 1300 Girl Reserves and the Board members reported to the Chest that not one of them had appeared in Juvenile Court.⁴⁷ In addition, the YWCA again advocated the raising of the school-leaving age, this time to eighteen years of age, and promoted the establishment of continuation schools as other preventive measures to curb delinquency.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ BOD minutes, May 15, 1928.

⁴⁶ BOD minutes, October 16, 1928.

⁴⁷ BOD minutes, November 15, 1927; February 3, 1928.

The inability to seek additional public funds compounded the Houston YWCA's attempts to support existing programs. In 1928, the Community Chest reduced the funds provided to the YWCA by \$2,500 and forced the association to approach the National Board to ask for a reduction in its national quota.⁴⁹ Each city association sent a portion of its profits or Community Chest funds to the National Board for the support of national programs. The Houston association prided itself on its ability to meet or exceed its quota owed to the National Board. The diminished funding from the Community Chest, however, caused the Houston YWCA to request that the National Board lower its quota and base the quota upon actual membership reports rather than the numbers of women participating in YWCA programs. The local association's enthusiasm over Chest participation continued to decline.

At the same time that it was pressuring the YWCA to take on programs outside of the mission of the association, the Houston Community Chest appealed to the association to participate in projects aimed to enhance the image of the city. This time, though, the projects the Chest expected the Houston YWCA to take on would enhance the image of the city on a national level. Houston had been selected to host the 1928 Democratic National Convention and civic leaders were eager to put forth its best image while in the national

⁴⁸ BOD minutes, May 19, 1928.

⁴⁹ The YWCA allotment from the Community Chest fell in 1928 from \$42,500 to 40,000. Actual YWCA membership in Houston was low in spite of the popularity of the programs. The local association did not require membership to participate in programs. Those who were not members paid a class fee.

spotlight. The large number of people attending the convention meant that the city had to tap into all of its available resources to tend to the needs of the convention attendees. The need to maximize usage of all city-wide lodging facilities and eating establishment brought the city to the door of the YWCA. In particular, the city desired the YWCA cafeteria to remain open twenty-four hours a day during the convention.

The city's appeal to the association for help during the 1928 Democratic National Convention shows a recognition of the importance of the YWCA to the city. It also illustrates the attitude of the Chest toward the YWCA and the expectations it had regarding the role the local association was to play in city events. Board of Directors' minutes illustrate a frustration on the part of the Board members regarding the lack of understanding on the part of the Chest as to the financial difficulties the association was experiencing. It was not financially possible for the YWCA to keep its cafeteria open twenty-four hours a day during the convention. The Board reached a compromise with the city. Although it determined it was not feasible to keep the cafeteria open for twenty-four hours, the Board of Directors did agree to extend the hours of operation for lunch and dinner and initiated breakfast service at its San Jacinto Street cafeteria for the duration of the convention.⁵⁰

Even though the YWCA Board of Directors worked diligently to address the concerns of the city and the Community Chest during the 1920s, the strained

⁵⁰ BOD minutes, February 21, 1928.

relationship between the Community Chest and the Houston YWCA continued for the remainder of 1928 and 1929. As the country tumbled into the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Houston YWCA again moved into a position of prominence. The association continued to serve the needs of women, but in a more remedial fashion because of the economic hardships brought about by the depression. Although the YWCA began receiving more support from the Community Chest, the change brought about by the tensions of the late 1920s lasted well after the economic struggles began to ease.

Part of the problem with the Community Chest could possibly have been the increased participation of the local YWCA into political affairs. Issues such as movie censorship, night employment of young girls, and solutions to the delinquency all fell into the realm of acceptable activities of the YWCA. But the association became more active in national and international affairs during the 1920s. Louise Masterson kept the Board of Directors aware of national and international issues and encouraged the Board to send letters to state legislators and senators in support of such things as the United States' participation in the World Court and the International Labor Organization, as well as support for the ratification of the Multilateral Treaty for the Renunciation of War.

The Houston YWCA also involved itself in the growing push for anti-lynching legislation and resolutions calling for the abolition of war. The local association participated in the National "No More War" demonstration in 1922 and sent a telegram to President Warren G. Harding denouncing America's

involvement in war.⁵¹ The subtle shift in focus of the YWCA complicated matters for the Community Chest as it often questioned the outlay of local money toward national activities.

The local association never really returned to the days when it could offer programs without its programs being scrutinized by a funding organization. That did not seem to matter. Work with industrial women and the new work taken on with African-American women propelled the association to push forward with the implementation of labor policies and racial inclusiveness despite a reluctance on the part of local citizens. Instead of working to keep the Community Chest and local citizens happy, the Houston YWCA began agitating for change.

⁵¹ BOD minutes, November 20, 1928; February 19, 1929; December 15, 1929. See also "Y to Preach 'No More War,'" *Houston Post*, July 26, 1922. Article can be found in YWCA Scrapbook, 1922. HMRC.

CHAPTER III

RACIAL INCLUSIVENESS AND THE HOUSTON YWCA, 1917– 941

A small article with the heading “Remaking a Source of Pride” appeared in the September 11, 1999, edition of the *Houston Chronicle*. The story described how a group of African-American service organizations, churches, and community leaders were joining together in an attempt to purchase the Houston YWCA Blue Triangle Branch facility. The aim was to better serve the needs of the Houston African-American community. The Blue Triangle facility, constructed in the 1950s and badly in need of repair, consisted of a gymnasium with only one functional basketball backboard, an empty swimming pool, and rooms that held few, if any, activities due to a lack of adequate funding.

The group of community leaders pushing for the purchase of the facility included many former YWCA members, some having been members of the organization for fifty years. After listening to the group’s appeal, the Houston YWCA Board of Directors agreed to sell the branch building, land, and contents, including reproduction rights to a John Biggers mural, to the group for a total of one dollar. The buyers wanted to transform the facility into the Blue Triangle Multicultural Center with financing from private and corporate funds. Programs to be offered by the new center, they hoped, would include childcare, senior citizens

activities, recreational programs, and employment training for the African-American community.¹

The events that culminated in the purchase of the Blue Triangle Branch by a private group of individuals were only a small part of a story that illustrates the place of the Blue Triangle Branch in the Houston African-American community. The frustration over lack of funding for the facility echoes similar sentiments that cover some seventy years in the life of the branch. The response of the community leaders also indicates a passion felt by those associated with the branch and their desire to serve the women and girls of the Third Ward area, located east of downtown Houston.

The formation of the Blue Triangle Branch of the Houston YWCA progressed in stages. The initial work began during World War I under the auspices of the YWCA National Board. Special War Worker and African American, Josephine Pinyon, organized a committee of prominent Houston African-American women to address the lack of recreational programs for African-American women and girls in the city. In addition, they were to provide hostess house services to African-American soldiers stationed at Camp Logan.

The second stage of development took place after World War I and involved the newly formed Houston Community Chest and the relationship of the Blue Triangle Branch to the Chest and the local white YWCA Board of Directors. The second stage continued through 1941, when the central association finally

¹ *Houston Chronicle*, September 11, 1999; p. 3.

granted the branch a voting member position on the Houston YWCA Board of Directors. The third developmental stage of the Blue Triangle Branch began in 1941 and continued through the construction of the facility on McGowan Street and the full racial integration of the YWCA cafeteria in 1955.

For approximately ten years after its inception, the Houston YWCA held a position as one of the premier women's organizations in the city, but it did not provide services for African-American women. During World War I, a change in that exclusionary policy brought the Houston YWCA more in line with the racial policies of the national association. The changes did not come about without some fear, resentment, and misunderstandings. Houston was, above all, a southern city with Jim Crow community segregation practices firmly entrenched.

In order to understand better the development of the Houston YWCA's policies regarding work with African-American women, one must first explore the origins and subsequent changes in the national policy of the YWCA relating to issues of race. Although it offered programs for women as early as 1866, not until 1892 did the national Young Women's Christian Association begin providing programs for African-American women and girls. In the following year, 1893, leaders in Dayton, Ohio, established the first African-American YWCA in the United States. At that time, a white YWCA also operated in Dayton but the two were not considered to be united in any way.² Prior to 1906, other African-American YWCAs and other African-American student groups affiliated with the

² Dorothy Salem, *To Better Our World: Black Women in Organizational Reform, 1890–1920* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1990), p. 47.

YWCA but no coherent policy on race existed within the organization. With the merger of the International Board and the American Board of the YWCA in 1906, under the direction of Grace Dodge, the YWCA finally addressed the issue of segregation and separate organizations for African-American women.³

Grace Dodge exerted a powerful influence in the development of the YWCA racial policy yet the fear of southern reactions to interracial programs and facilities kept the YWCA from embracing a more expansive program of race relations. Prior to her election as President of the National Board of the YWCA, Dodge had worked at the White Rose Home in New York City, a facility that attempted to aid and assist African-American women and girls arriving in New York. Her experiences at White Rose Home shaped her view on interracial cooperation and she brought that insight to the National Board of the YWCA.

As the newly-formed national Board discussed how to bring existing YWCAs under its control, Dodge recommended that the already existing African-American organizations be incorporated as separate YWCA entities rather than branches of the white city associations. Although the Board acquiesced to Dodge's wishes and accepted the existing organizations, Board members determined that new African-American YWCAs were to be admitted as branches of the local white associations.

Branch affiliation meant that the African-American branches operated under the control of a white central association Board of Directors. Although not

³ Ibid.

ideal, the National Board believed the subordinate status necessary in order to appease women associated with the white southern associations. The national association, in turn, attempted to minimize the effect of white domination by instituting guidelines that provided for the training of YWCA employees working with the black branches. The Board believed such action would eventually develop into an organizational system allowing African-American women to rise to leadership positions within the branch. The national association, in the meantime, continued to emphasize the desirability of interracial conferences as a way to explore issues of race and ethnicity within the entire organization. In reality, segregated branches often meant that the YWCA could tout itself as an interracial organization without having to address fully issues of racial equality.⁴

By the time the Houston YWCA began the formation of the Blue Triangle Branch, the national association had a system established to provide the services of experienced African-American YWCA secretaries to city associations. In 1913, the National Board began moving toward a more visible presence for African-American women within the association. That year the National Board hired Eva Bowles as its first African-American Secretary for Colored Work to assist the city associations. Bowles had previously been an employee of the Harlem YWCA. The National Board continued to hire African-American women who, they felt, had administrative experience, exuded a Christian spirit, were educated, and had a “feel” for the group they served. Within two years, the

⁴ Some historians question the usage of the term “interracial” to describe the early YWCA, asserting instead that the association appeared to be “bi-racial.”

national YWCA employed twenty-six African-American women and over one hundred African-American schools moved to affiliate with the association.⁵

The YWCA proclaimed itself an interracial organization even though, depending on the region of the country, various stages of integration existed. The South, in particular, resisted racial integration for a much longer period of time than other regions of the country. The national association recognized the regional differences and tried to adjust its programs accordingly. Although the National Board desired a greater level of interracial cooperation, feedback from various national staff members led them to understand that the process would be very slow in some cities. In a very telling statement, Eva Bowles commented that the YWCA had to be careful not to progress “too fast” with racial integration. She noted that both white and African-American groups agreed to push for greater inclusiveness “only as far as both groups were willing to go.”⁶

Bowles reported to the national office in 1924 that interracial cooperation had to proceed with caution, particularly in the South. She stressed that before the YWCA could expect to have an effect in the community, it had to first recognize the racial situation in any given community and make sure that an interracial consciousness was already at work. Bowles particularly noted the tenuous relationship between the white central associations and African-American branches operating in southern communities. She stressed the

⁵ Salem, *To Better Our World*, p. 143.

⁶ Annual Report of Eva Bowles to City Department, 1924, SSC.

importance of the development of a close working relationships between the two groups in order to ensure the success of the branch.

In her evaluation of the place of the branch in the overall YWCA program, Bowles viewed it as an extension of the YWCA in the African-American community and believed that the general secretary of the white central association had to be willing to accept the branch secretary as a co-worker. In another recommendation, she addressed the relationship of the white central association secretary with the people being served by the black branch. According to Bowles, the only way the white central association could understand the operation of the branch was to have the white general secretary become more involved with the African-American branch and the African-American community.⁷

As seen in reports from national staff members, the National Board's concern regarding the alienation of southern associations continued to be evident well into the 1930s. One report in particular illustrated the YWCA's dilemma. In 1933, the secretary of the National Services Division of the YWCA, Kathleen Dietz, stressed that if it pushed too hard for inclusion of African Americans into the entire association life, the YWCA ran the risk of "killing off approximately 95% of Southern associations." However, if it did not proceed in some significant manner toward improving race relations, the organization would "arouse bitter antagonism" from its African-American members. The growing resentment of

⁷ "Annual Report of E.D. Bowles to City Department, 1925, 1926." SSC

southern associations toward the National Board, as late as the 1930s, led the association to recommend building “with the community, not against it.”⁸

A thorough understanding of the National Board’s attempts at interracial cooperation is imperative when assessing the progress of the Houston YWCA regarding racial integration. Only within such a context can one ask questions relating to the speed of integration within the Houston association, the amount of resistance from civic leaders and citizens, and the impact of the association on citywide racial inclusiveness. In addition, it is within this context that one can grasp more fully the actions of the Houston YWCA Board of Directors and determine its role as a catalyst for change in race relations.

As stated earlier, during the first ten years of its existence, the Houston YWCA served only white, predominantly middle-class women.⁹ The programs offered by the association meshed well with the desires of the local Board of Directors women and civic leaders. But Houston boasted an African-American population in 1917 of approximately 34,000.¹⁰ Although African Americans

⁸ Confidential Report of Meeting to Discuss the Objectives of the Y.W.C.A. Considered in Relation to its Interracial Work, September 11, 1933. Meeting held at Blue Ridge, N.C., July 26, 1933. SCC.

⁹ The term “middle class” is used here to show that the Board appeared to make a distinction between the women served by the YWCA and women they deemed “socially deviant.” Board members operated under the assumption that the women seeking affiliation with the YWCA came from respectable families and that they needed help in maintaining that respectability.

¹⁰ Howard Beeth and Cary Wintz, eds., *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 89.

composed a large percentage of the city's population, Houston provided very few services for that population and even fewer organized activities for African-American women and girls.

The entry of the United States into World War I initiated a change that had a profound effect on the Houston YWCA and the city as a whole. Houston civic and business leaders lobbied tirelessly to secure a military training facility, and much to their pleasure, the military put into motion plans to construct Camp Logan. Although happy at the news, city leaders expressed discomfort and dismay when they found that the facility would house African-American soldiers. The fear of having a large contingent of African-American soldiers within the city, coupled with concerns regarding the anticipated numbers of women who would visit the facility, caused local leaders to call upon the expertise of the Houston YWCA for assistance. Within a relatively short period of time, the Houston YWCA moved from an organization serving primarily wage-working women to one serving both the national government and local civic leaders.

The local association had to call upon the National Board of the YWCA for instructions and suggestions on how to proceed in its work with African Americans. The local YWCA had no previous experience with programs for African-American women or with wartime related programs. The National Board, however, was prepared to handle wartime emergencies. The federal government had brought together the national YWCA, the Young Men's Christian Association, the Red Cross, and four other agencies to help serve the needs of

soldiers and others affected by wartime displacement throughout the world.¹¹

The National YWCA's history of serving women and girls prompted the federal government to look to the association to assist women moving to the cities for war work and to provide programs for young girls in cantonment centers. In May 1917, the federal government placed at the disposal of the National Board of the YWCA over one million dollars to provide services for women during the war period. Part of the money went to develop programs for African-American women and girls.

The National Board in October 1917 sent Josephine Pinyon to Houston to evaluate the overall situation in the city and to determine the feasibility of establishing a Hostess House for African-American soldiers at Camp Logan.¹² Pinyon arrived in the city on October 14, 1917, and immediately surveyed the situation. Her subsequent reports to the national office provide interesting insights into Houston race relations, the attitudes of local YWCA leaders, and even the opinions of city leaders regarding women's involvement in national and civic affairs.

Pinyon initially reported that the race situation in Houston appeared to be somewhat calm and that the African-American troops stationed at Camp Logan

¹¹ Nina Mjagkij, "Morals and Morals: The YWCA with Black Troops in World War I." A paper presented at the Southern Conference on Women's History, June 10 – 11, 1988. In author's possession.

¹² Report from Josephine Pinyon to the National Board, November 23, 1917. SSC.

received favorable comments in the press.¹³ Her report is important considering that a race riot occurred in the city less than one month prior to her arrival. The racial situation in Houston prior to the riot had been fairly calm and this calm continued through the early days of the camp. The “bliss” ended in September 1917 when soldiers from Camp Logan marched toward downtown Houston to protest the enforcement of Jim Crow laws and police brutality. By the end of the evening, several soldiers and citizens lay dead or wounded. The event shook the city and exposed the façade of happy African-American citizens and their congenial acceptance of segregation.¹⁴

Pinyon’s initial report also noted a strong professional-class representation in the African-American population. She commented that numerous African-American Houstonians owned their own homes and businesses and that many of the African-American civic leaders had been educated at such institutions as Fisk and Howard universities. Her initial survey of public facilities available to African-American Houstonians found that the schools, library, and settlement houses all appeared in fairly good shape.

As her stay lengthened, Pinyon’s evaluation of the services and facilities began to change. A later report noted that many of the facilities were poorly equipped and that the Houston Social Services Bureau, which oversaw

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Robert V. Haynes, *A Night of Violence* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976). See also Edger A. Schuler, “Houston Race Riot, 1917” in the *Journal of Negro History* 20 (July 1944): p. 301-338.

provisions for African-American services and facilities, gave only minimal support to African-American activities.¹⁵ The establishment of a “colored” auxiliary to the Social Service Foundation in 1914, she noted, did not improve the provision of funding for the African-American population in Houston. Pinyon also commented on Houston’s wards, stating that the “ward feeling” kept whites and African Americans separated with the largest numbers of African-American citizens residing in the Third and Fourth Wards.¹⁶

Within the context of heightened racial tension, racial segregation, and wartime needs, the local association and the National Board established what later became known as the Blue Triangle Branch of the Houston YWCA. The needs of city leaders, the trepidation of local YWCA Board members, and the desires of the National Board all contributed to an endless game of tug of war as the local association and the city slowly crossed racial barriers. City leaders desired recreational programs to entertain African-American women and girls in the hopes of lessening their presence at Camp Logan. Many in the city felt that the presence of women and liquor at the camp contributed to the September 1917 riot.¹⁷

Local YWCA Board members wanted to participate in the wartime effort, and the requests by the city for aid elevated the association to a place of

¹⁵ Pinyon Report to National Board, October, 14–25, 1917. SSC.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Schuler, “*Houston Race Riot, 1917*,” pp. 301-338.

prominence in relation to other service-oriented organizations in Houston. Furthermore, many of the women sitting on the Houston YWCA Board of Directors possessed a patriotic fervor that propelled them to offer their skills to the city and to the nation. Their lack of experience with African-American women, though, left them uneasy with the task they were given. The National Board offered assistance to the local association yet also had its own agenda for interracial cooperation and women's participation in the wartime emergency.

Josephine Pinyon's attempts to establish a Hostess House at Camp Logan illustrate the conflicting attitudes of the local civic leaders and the National Board regarding services to African Americans as well as women's participation in civic affairs. Pinyon felt it imperative that a core group of white YWCA women and African-American community leaders come together to organize a plan for staffing a Hostess House and developing programs for African-American women and girls. She particularly desired what she referred to as "women of position and influence" from the African-American community.¹⁸

As Pinyon saw it, three hurdles had to be cleared before proceeding with her plan for Houston. First, although numerous white Board members were well traveled and educated, their experiences with African-Americans were limited and thus not as progressive as the national association hoped. National YWCA secretaries determined that they had to teach the Houston YWCA women how to deal with interracial issues. In one report back to the national office, Pinyon

¹⁸ Pinyon report, October 14–25, 1917. SSC.

referred to two of the more prominent Houston YWCA women as “progressive” or “interested” yet “very Southern.”¹⁹ Secondly, local male leaders appeared to Pinyon to be less than willing to spend money on “Negroes.” She had to develop a plan to show how the city needed facilities for African-American Houstonians and that the African-American community would help support such facilities and programs. Thirdly, she had to persuade two groups of very active African-American women to leave their work of attempting to force the city to hire an African-American probation officer and policewoman and join forces with the white women to benefit African-American women and girls.²⁰

Pinyon identified several leaders within the African-American women’s groups who met her criteria for YWCA Colored Work Committee members. The next step consisted of organizing both the white and African-American women in such a way as to facilitate the development of a Colored Work program operating as an extension of the Houston YWCA. It proved to be more difficult than she anticipated. Although highly regarded members of their respective communities, the white and African-American women did not know each other. Houston’s segregated wards separated the two groups so successfully along racial lines that no class alliances developed. Their lack of familiarity with each other led immediately to concerns, particularly on the part of the African-American women. Many of the African-American women wanted to know what would happen if they

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

began working with the Houston YWCA and what motivated the white women to acquiesce to Pinyon's plan.²¹

After her initial meetings with the two groups of women, Pinyon proposed a plan, which consisted of the appointment by the chairman of the local YWCA Board of seven African-American women to the position of "Branch Committee." The committee, in turn, would promote YWCA club work among African-American girls. The local white association would also provide a trained worker who reported to the Board then carried the Board recommendations back to the Branch Committee. Pinyon had very strong concerns regarding the personality, as well as training, of the soon to be hired worker. In a report to the national office, she requested that a "well-trained and adaptable person" be sent to Houston. She also believed that a person who was not a native Houstonian would best fit the bill in Houston. She described one person she recommended for the position as being, "an adaptable young person with a courageous spirit and some love for adventure, valuable assets in Texas." She noted very pointedly that the "right woman" for the job did not seem to be in Houston.²²

Once the organizational problem had been handled, Pinyon moved on to the pressing need for a Hostess House at Camp Logan. She proposed that the local YWCA assume the work of staffing the Hostess House and administering the needs of those using the facility. In addition, the Chairman of the War Work

²¹ Pinyon report, October, 20, 1917. SSC.

²² Pinyon report, November 23, 1917. SSC.

Council would appoint a strong committee of African-American women who would work closely with organizations involved in protective work.²³ In this way, the YWCA's work with the African-American population would be more palatable to city leaders, as it addressed their two pressing community concerns. Although there were no objections by the women to the plan, the local male leadership voiced displeasure with the inner workings of the proposed system.

The Federal Commission representative in Houston proved to be the most vocal opponent of the plan developed by Pinyon and the YWCA women. His objections and subsequent actions illustrate how city leaders expected the women to participate in wartime programs. In a move that presaged a capital campaign in the 1921 for the construction of a YWCA activities center, the Federal Representative and male civic leaders announced that they had devised a plan for serving the soldiers at Camp Logan. Without consulting the YWCA women, who had been approached by city leaders to do the work, the male leaders announced that citizens of Houston would construct a YMCA building for the African-American soldiers at Camp Logan and the YWCA could use one wing of the building as a Hostess House.²⁴

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Pinyon report, October 22, 1917. When the YWCA decided to proceed with the erection of a new activities center after the war, the "men of the city" told the Houston YWCA Board of Directors to send the National Campaign Organizers from the national YWCA back to New York because the Houston men would work to raise the money from the new building.

The proposal came as a surprise to Pinyon as well as the male YMCA employee working with Camp Logan. Pinyon found herself stuck in an uncomfortable position with the proposal. She had to explain to male civic leaders the role of the YWCA in the wartime effort and how the association functioned separately from the YMCA. Pinyon stated that the YWCA, although a cooperating member of the aforementioned War Work Council, had a mandate to serve the needs of women and girls. The combination of the YMCA and the YWCA Hostess House made it appear that both organizations served the same purpose and were not separate entities. The proposal by the male civic leaders, therefore, went against YWCA dictates, and Pinyon expressed her reservations.

The response Pinyon received regarding her objections indicated not only the disdain of the federal representative regarding spending money on African-American soldiers, which had already been vocalized, but also echoed the response of some citizens regarding non-Houstonians trying to dictate the actions of local people.²⁵ In a very terse response that caused Pinyon to retreat and reorganize, the federal representative informed her that local people gave the money and that he did not think they would wait to get directions from New York. Furthermore, he stressed to Pinyon that all war work in Houston fell under his supervision and that if the women wanted government funding, things would have to be done his way or no way at all.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

The city's response to the plan developed by Pinyon and the other African-American committee members caused the YWCA to rethink its design for work both at Camp Logan and work with African-American women and girls in the city. The situation at Camp Logan seemed to be more difficult, and as it turned out, the Hostess House never came to fruition even though Pinyon and the YWCA adapted their plan and agreed to fund the house using only YWCA funds. By the time the difficulties had been settled between the YWCA and the city leaders, the needs had decreased to a point where it was no longer feasible to erect a permanent structure for Hostess House work. The plan to develop programs for African-American women and girls, though, showed greater potential.

One of the reasons Pinyon felt that an African-American branch program might be feasible was the pressing need for someone to tackle the so-called "girl problem" associated with Camp Logan. In her report to New York, she stated that girls "swarmed the place at all hours," either walking or riding in cars to the camp.²⁷ Many leaders in the African-American community felt that the problem stemmed from a lack of appropriate recreational programs for African-American girls. The African-American women organized by Pinyon felt that something had to be done immediately or the situation at Camp Logan, and the city as a whole, would continue to worsen. The African-American women committee members felt that the national YWCA needed to enact programs for women of color in

²⁷ Ibid.

cantonment cities in much the same way that it offered programs for white women and girls.²⁸

Pinyon further noted that the YWCA had to do something or the local people would act, thus causing future embarrassment. She did not elaborate as to how any actions on the part of the local people would lead to embarrassment but she did write that she feared letting the women work on their own. Instead, Pinyon endeavored to find women who would not arouse any great antagonism from the local white population. She took it upon herself to appoint women to committees and even refused to allow the women to choose the work they wished to perform. The fear of alienating a large southern city organization led the National Board to control as many facets of the work with African Americans as possible.²⁹

Pinyon's fear of the local women is somewhat perplexing in light of the social status of both the white members of the Board of Directors and the branch committee members. They reflected professional-class values that were prominent in other African-American branches of the YWCA. Mrs. B. J. (Jessie)

²⁸ As noted previously, the local YWCA offered increased housing for white women moving into the city, engaged the Employment Bureau in soliciting room referrals from private individuals, organized Patriotic Leagues designed to stress moral issues, and offered lectures on social morality. Increased recreational activities were also extended to the women as well as the soldiers. See Elizabeth Wilson, *The Religious and Educational Philosophy of the Young Women's Christian Association* (New York: Columbia University Teachers College, 1933), p. 62. For programs offered in Houston, see Mrs. W. M. Baines, *Houston's Part in the World War* (Houston, n.p., 1919), pp. 77-78, HMRC.

²⁹ Pinyon report, November 23, 1917. SSC

Covington, one of the more distinguished members of the African-American women's committee was the wife of a very prominent African-American doctor who was well known in Houston as well as throughout the state of Texas. The Covington family stood out in Houston as the epitome of an upper class African-American family. Covington continued to work with the branch after the war, becoming the Executive Secretary of the Committee of Management. The Blue Triangle Branch considered her one of the founders of the organization.³⁰ Apparently the lack of contact between the white and African-American women caused Pinyon to feel uncomfortable and she, as well as the National Board, believed that by having a national staff member direct the development of branch programs, potential racial tension could be lessened.

In November of 1917, after laying the foundation for the continuation of a Colored Work program in the city, Pinyon left Houston. The Blue Triangle Branch, which emerged from the war work performed by African-American women and girls, continued to offer programs with aid from the white central association. It received official branch status in February of 1920. The operation of the branch, however, fell under the direct control of the white central association, as had been stipulated by the agreement made at the time of the formation of the National Board of the YWCA in 1907.

The maintenance of a Colored Work Department after the wartime emergency became extremely difficult for the local Board of Directors. During

³⁰ The Covington family papers are housed at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

the war, the local association received funding from the National Board. Once the war ended, the responsibility of financing work with African-American women and girls fell on the local association. The economic condition of the African-American community meant that the branch experienced financial difficulties very early in its existence even though the central association occasionally assumed some of the financial obligations of the branch and assumed the expenses associated with the employment of a Colored Work Secretary.³¹

The African-American community's desire for services provided by the YWCA were apparent with the rapidity of growth associated with the branch. Within its first year of operation, branch participation numbers grew to such a total that the organization hired an assistant to the Colored Work Secretary.³² The Board of Directors hired Mrs. Louie Love as the first Colored Work Secretary, but the Board struggled to pay the salaries of both a secretary and an assistant. When the Board of Directors appealed to the national YWCA office concerning its difficulties, the National Board responded by offering to contribute up to one-half of the annual salary of both a Colored Work secretary and an assistant with the monies coming from the National Board's Post-Continuation Fund.³³

³¹ BOD minutes, October 12, 1920.

³² BOD minutes, August 17, 1921.

³³ Ibid.

Once the wartime emergency abated, the relationship between the African-American committeewomen and the white Houston YWCA Board members became more strained. Although the local association's Board minutes reflect a desire on the part of many of the members to continue with the programs for African-American women and girls, the "return to normalcy" associated with the post-war period meant that the women went back to being estranged from each other. Even though the branch elected a Committee of Management, which included some of the more prominent women in the African-American community, the central association continued to control the actions of the branch. The Board of Directors' minutes from the central association reflected an air of maternalism toward the African-American members, a maternalism that continued through the 1930s.

The tenuous relationship between the central association and the branch manifested itself in many ways. The central association Board of Directors rarely discussed the programs offered by the branch yet had to approve any changes or additions to programs or purchases made by the branch. Most of the discussions noted in the Board minutes about the Blue Triangle Branch centered on the financial aspects of continuing the branch. Unfortunately, early records of the branch have disappeared, thereby denying a greater picture of the attitudes of the branch Committee of Management.³⁴

³⁴ Inquiries into the records from both the Blue Triangle Branch and the Magnolia Park branch proved futile. A possible explanation given for the disappearance of the Blue Triangle Branch records was their loss in floodwaters

Central association Board members continually stressed the importance of branch members and participants assuming financial responsibility for their organization as if it were not an organic part of the Houston YWCA. Money for new purchases had to be in hand before the branch could proceed with any purchase. Records show that during the same time period that the Board of Directors stressed financial responsibility of its branch, the central association itself struggled financially. The central association, though, had an increased level of public support because of the organization's efforts during World War I.

The end of the war brought such a renewed interest in the YWCA that a capital campaign for the construction of a new YWCA Activities Center gained support. The Board of Directors built on the association's new and expanded position in the community to advocate the construction of a YWCA building on par with the newly built YMCA structure. The citizens of Houston recognized the importance of the work done by the local YWCA during the war and viewed the construction of a new YWCA facility as a way to thank the association for its service and dedication.³⁵ The appreciation did not extend to the newly organized Colored Work program. The focus remained on white women and girls.

that flooded the basement of the YWCA building. No one contacted within the organization appeared to know where any records existed regarding the operation of the Magnolia Park Branch, although it was mentioned that the records might exist in storage or in the attic of the building.

³⁵ "Inaugurate Move for New Y.W.C.A. Home in Houston," *Houston Post*, January 29, 1919.

Facilities for African-American members remained the same. The Blue Triangle Branch operated out of the Odd Fellows Building, which offered only a limited amount of space and few “extras,” such as tables and chairs. The lack of space and facilities, though, did not mean that the branch failed to serve the African-American women and girls who came to its facility. The Committee of Management for the branch attempted to offer programs that benefited the local African-American community as a whole and often patterned their activities after the white programs offered by the central association. The Board of Directors’ minutes failed to list the programs offered by the Branch. The African-American newspaper, *The Houston Informer*, however, advertised Blue Triangle Branch programs and events. Thus it is possible to determine the types of activities offered to African-American women and girls.³⁶

What emerges from the Board of Directors’ minutes is a picture of the place of the branch within the local African-American community. The membership numbers do not adequately portray the number of women and girls participating in Branch programs. In addition, many African-American churches and lodges used the YWCA facilities at the Odd Fellows Building for meetings and social functions, which in turn made the Blue Triangle Branch a very visible fixture within the African-American community. Local schools cooperated with

³⁶ *The Houston Informer* ran notices about the Blue Triangle Branch in a section reserved for information on various clubs and organizations for the African-American community.

the branch and sent children to the YWCA in the afternoons to participate in after-school programs.³⁷

Board minutes illustrate how the central association viewed the branch as a financial drain, reacting negatively to deficits incurred by the branch. The attempt to purchase land for an African-American summer camp illustrated how the Board of Directors failed to accept the endeavor as an extension of YWCA programs. It further illustrated how a fear of declining funds propelled the local Board to squelch plans for the purchase of land in order to protect the white association from negative press.

In 1921, the mayor of Houston, H. Baldwin Rice, offered his property in Kemah as a site for an African-American girls summer camp.³⁸ The Board of Directors, before agreeing to the development of the camp, sent a group to Kemah to survey the attitudes and opinions of local residents. The survey determined that the Kemah residents had no objection to the development of a YWCA camp for African-American girls. When the group returned with its report, the Board set in motion plans for the construction of a camp facility. Development halted, however, once the Board members determined that the Houston residents who owned property in Kemah objected to the camp. Later plans for the development of a camp for the Branch also failed because of

³⁷ One school principal believed so strongly in the YWCA program that he had all of the girls report to the YWCA after school. Interview with Thelma Scott Bryant, March 1999.

³⁸ BOD minutes, July 21, 1927; November 25, 1927.

negative press and fear on the part of the Board of Directors that it might lead to a reduction of monies coming to the association from Houston citizens and later from the Houston Community Chest.³⁹

The camp situation brings to the forefront the problems faced by the central association in appearing to be somewhat progressive in racial matters while having to appease a community upon which it depended for the financing of its programs. In the early post-World War I period, the Houston YWCA did not want to jeopardize its popularity or its good standing in the community. The association relied on yearly capital campaigns to finance its programs and it could not alienate possible contributors by funneling a great deal of money to the Blue Triangle Branch.

Directives coming from the national office, and the realization of appeasing its funding source, put the Houston YWCA in a precarious position. The Board of Directors could be supportive of African-American programs but it could be hazardous monetarily for the association to support African-American programs with "white" dollars. A discussion on the part of the Board of Directors regarding a branch residence for employed women provides an example of the Board members' concern about financing a major Branch program. Board members had little objection to the operation of an African-American residence as long as it was financially solvent. Once the residence was established during the early 1920s, local African-American churches and lodges appeared to offer

³⁹ Ibid.

more assistance than the central association with the provisions of linens and other necessities. There are few indications that the central association offered much assistance to the branch beyond some used linens from the central association's residence but the Board minutes reveal that Board members were aware of the contributions of the African-American community.

The branch received very little monetary assistance from the central association. The financial report of May 1922 showed that the Colored Work Department received \$3,500 for the year out of a total campaign fund disbursement of \$801,000.⁴⁰ The total of \$801,000 is a little misleading as the local association raised much of the money in a capital campaign with the money earmarked for the construction of the new activities center. The percentage of money provided to the branch, though, remained small. Pledges from the African-American community comprised a large portion of the monies designated for the branch. When the pledge collections stagnated, the Board of Directors became increasingly frustrated, as it had advanced \$1,000 to the branch.⁴¹

The city's rigid social and residential segregation could account for some of the failure on the part of the Board in assessing the African-American community's ability to monetarily provide for numerous YWCA programs. But segregation cannot explain fully the Board of Directors' failure to comprehend the economic situation facing African Americans in Houston. Although the Chamber

⁴⁰ BOD minutes, May 30, 1922.

⁴¹ BOD minutes, May 21, 1922.

of Commerce proclaimed the city to be “Heavenly Houston,” jobs for African Americans remained limited and low paying.⁴² Too many demands for money often forced the African-American community to prioritize needs with the Blue Triangle Branch having to fight for available funds. An example of the problem faced by the branch can be seen again with the continuing camp situation.

At the same time that the branch began its appeal for money to purchase land for a camp, the African-American citizens of Houston began soliciting funds to equip a hospital, which had been given to the African-American community by Joseph Cullinan, founder of the Texas Company (Texaco). Cullinan provided the initial monies for the establishment of Riverside Hospital, the first African-American hospital in Houston, but the African-American citizens had to provide the equipment. Board minutes note the importance of the hospital to the community yet fail to acknowledge any understanding of the financial hardships experienced by the branch that may have been due to the limited income of African-American citizens.

A relevant point to make is that many Board members also participated in other organizations in the city and had access to reports issued from the Houston Social Service Foundation (HSSF) that should have made them aware of the

⁴² The Houston Chamber of Commerce ran full page advertisements in the local papers proclaiming “Heavenly Houston”: The Workshop of Texas, Where Seventeen Railroads Meet the Sea.” The ad elaborated on how Houston offered “unexcelled industrial opportunities to the colored man.” It also told of the Colored Carnegie Library, Emancipation Park, motion picture houses, and the two African-American newspapers.

financial difficulties facing the African-American community. As early as 1914, the HSSF decried the living conditions in the African-American community and acknowledged the responsibility of all citizens to alleviate the wretched conditions found in various parts of Houston.⁴³ Mrs. W.B. Sharp chaired the HSSF for a number of years and also sat on the YWCA Board. Information was available to the Board but apparently little connection was made between the reports of the HSSF and the monetary shortcomings of the Branch. The Board minutes are silent as to any desire on the part of the Board to help the branch and in turn, to help the entire African-American community.

Part of the problem stemmed from the limited involvement of African-American women in association life. When the Board of Directors received reports regarding the activities of the Branch, a white member of the Board assigned to Colored Work made the presentation. Any desires on the part of the branch to offer programs or purchase equipment had to be presented to the Board through the Colored Work Committee representative. All through the 1920s, the Board of Directors' minutes are replete with requests from the branch to lease buildings, purchase equipment, host special fund raising events, and to operate a cafeteria for working girls. The denial of the Board to allow a branch member to make a presentation meant that very little interracial contact existed. The occurrence of interracial contact was so limited that when it did occur, the Board often commented on it in the minutes.

⁴³ Annual Report of the Social Service Federation Incorporated, Houston, Texas, Year Ending March, 1914, p. 11, HMRC.

Other instances of interracial contact often revolved around the appearance of branch members or employees at the Annual Membership Banquet. Even though the Board excluded branch members from participation in the Annual Banquet, groups from the branch or African-American employees often provided musical entertainment. Board minutes in 1925 recorded an instance of the association's African-American employees entertaining banquet attendees with "old Negro spirituals."⁴⁴ The minutes note how the employees "added very materially to the pleasure of the evening with their singing." As late as 1934, the Board forwarded a letter of appreciation to the Glee Club at the Blue Triangle Branch for their entertainment at the Annual Banquet.⁴⁵ It was not until 1935 that the branch members had the "privilege" of attending the banquet. The meal portion of the Annual Meeting, though, was discontinued and the name changed from the Annual Membership Banquet to the Annual Membership Meeting to make it more acceptable to white women.⁴⁶

During the 1930s, the attitude of the Board toward the branch began to change slightly. Several factors contributed to the change, including the economic depression of the decade, the concern of the Community Chest regarding services for the African-American population in Houston, more

⁴⁴ BOD minutes, February 2, 1925.

⁴⁵ BOD minutes, February 15, 1934.

⁴⁶ Letter from Goldie E. Mitchell, Secretary of the Houston YWCA Blue Triangle Branch to Mrs. A. M. Gats of Durham, North Carolina, February 15, 1935. HMRC.

progressive directives from the national YWCA office, and the attendance at interracial conferences of both white and African-American business and professional women of the Houston association.

A slow shift in thinking of the association regarding race relations caused some tense moments at the Board of Directors meetings as the association members began embracing a greater awareness of interracial cooperation. The Board members did not have to worry as much about the Community Chest and the funds it provided to the association during the 1930s. Even though the economic depression contributed to a decline in overall monetary pledges to the Community Chest, the Chest continued to support the YWCA's work with African-American women and girls.

As early as 1930, the Board of Directors' minutes show the recognition by the Houston YWCA that the Blue Triangle branch fell short of meeting the needs of the African-American female population. The Board singled out the residence as one part of the branch that failed to address the needs of a large segment of the African-American population, namely the girls making the lowest salaries. The prices charged by the branch residence were high enough to exclude those women bringing in a minimum salary, particularly during the economic depression.⁴⁷ The residence subsequently adjusted its policies regarding acceptable pay ranges for residents and allowed lower salaried girls to be housed at the residence.

⁴⁷ BOD minutes, January 21, 1930.

Because of its continued deficit, the branch residence caused considerable concern throughout the 1930s. But this time the association did not fear a loss of funds. The Community Chest encouraged the central association to continue operating the branch residence as it provided a place to care for emergency cases.⁴⁸ The central association struggled to subsidize the facility on the quota granted by the Community Chest. Although a source of financial stress for the association, the branch residence continued to operate through 1935.

When trying to determine the relationship between the Houston YWCA, the Community Chest, and the Blue Triangle Branch from the late 1920s through the 1930s, the local association's quota from the Chest is important to consider. Both the YMCA and the YWCA operated a colored branch but the Chest records list the YMCA's branch separately for funding purposes. The YWCA did not have a separate listing for the Blue Triangle Branch, therefore creating a gap in funding between the YMCA and the YWCA. Even though the women received less funding, the YWCA continued with its programs and Board members again believed they provided a service to the city in much the same way as it did in the early years and during World War I.

Board minutes from the year 1934 indicate the beginning a greater awareness of interracial cooperation for the Houston YWCA Board of Directors. The branch Committee of Management began requesting increased assistance and cooperation from the Board. In response, the Board began making

⁴⁸ BOD minutes, February 16, 1932.

additional concessions to the branch. What contributed to the shift in thinking of the association? And even more importantly, what caused the Houston YWCA to change from an organization fearful of losing the support of the community by its embracing of better interracial cooperation to an organization helping to lead the way to better race relations in the city?

The Board of Directors' minutes provide possible answers to those questions. The change appears to be generated by both the branch and the Business and Professional clubwomen of the Houston association. In 1931, the Blue Triangle Branch Committee of Management approached the Board of Directors with a request to purchase land for a camp. The branch possessed approximately \$4,000 for the land purchase yet the Board of Directors told the branch committee that they were not to proceed toward buying land for a camp due to a large deficit originating primarily with the branch cafeteria. One month after being told that a land purchase was out of the question, the Board minutes indicate that the branch committee fought the decision. The Colored Work Secretary informed the Board members that she "feared the colored people were losing confidence in us because of our constantly putting them off . . ." The Board agreed to allow the branch to close the deal on the site and later agreed to the construction of the camp facility.⁴⁹

Another major contributor to the move toward a more racially inclusive program was the attitude of the women themselves, particularly business,

⁴⁹ BOD minutes, March 24, 1931.

professional, and industrial women. The national YWCA office began stressing racial inclusiveness more strenuously in the South by the 1930s and several national secretaries visited Houston during the decade. The economic situation of the Depression era made it difficult for women from Houston to attend the racially integrated national meetings that were often held on the East Coast. By 1937, the Southwest region had begun holding its own conferences. In a confidential report dated March 13, 1937, national Business Secretary Winifred Wygal reported back to the National Board that because Texas and Oklahoma people could not get to the East coast, “they were not getting on, in racial attitudes.” According to Wygal, “there is no way to dig local groups out of provincialism on race except through national meetings.”⁵⁰ Her stand on the issue apparently came from her observation of city associations in the south and the comment from one member of the National Board from the southwest region who stated that she felt it was a “mistake to push for racial experiences beyond what can happen in a community.”⁵¹

Houston, however, stood out to Wygal as a place of limitless possibilities. One reason for her positive attitude toward the city could have been the activities of the Houston YWCA business and professional women and their secretary, Clara Rakhol. The southwestern region held Interracial Conferences for Business and Professional Girls in 1938 and then again in 1940 and a

⁵⁰ Report from Winnifred Wygal to the National Board, March 13, 1937. SCC.

⁵¹ Ibid.

representative from the Houston association, Lillian Fischer, served as the conference secretary. Conference coordinators took a very firm stance on the interracial nature of the gathering. Fischer mailed a flyer to each of the associations in the southwest region and made it clear that if representatives could not come to the conference with an open mind regarding race, they should stay at home.⁵² Houston also hosted the Business and Professional State Midwinter Conference during 1939 and the minutes record that African-American girls and women from various associations were included in all meetings. The social functions, though, continued to be segregated.

The most obvious change on the part of the Board of Directors involved a change to the association's constitution that allowed for a member of the Blue Triangle Branch's Committee of Management to sit as an ex-officio member of the central association's Board of Directors. The Board minutes do not provide any indication as to why members adopted such a stance. The change did not take place smoothly as several Board members requested that the change be removed from the constitution. The argument over the constitutional changes continued from November 1935 through January 1936 and included responses from the Community Chest. Board members met with three representatives from the Houston Community Chest and asked their opinion regarding the possibility of a African-American woman sitting on the YWCA Board of Directors. The

⁵² Flyer and letter pertaining to Interracial Conferences included in YWCA Collection. SSC.

Chest representatives informed the YWCA Board "it would ruin the YWCA to have Negro women on the Board."⁵³ Two members of the YWCA Board objecting to the constitutional change attempted to have it removed at the January 21, 1936, Board of Directors meeting. The motion to strike the new sections lost with only two votes being cast for it. Considering the stance taken by the Board in the 1920s regarding threats of decreased monetary support, the decision to stick with the constitutional change is important.

Pinpointing the exact reasons behind the change in attitude regarding interracial cooperation is difficult. What is apparent is the changing attitude of the women members, particularly employed women attending interracial conferences. Their exposure to women of color at national conferences made it easier for them to return to their own associations and lobby for subtle changes. African-American women associated with the Blue Triangle Branch also attended the conferences and began attempting to implement some of the changes they experienced at the national conferences. Even though the interracial cooperation at the conferences at times fell short of expectations, the experience still left a profound impact on many of the participants. The branch members gained confidence from the conferences and used that confidence to begin demanding more from the white Board of Directors.

The Houston YWCA's relationship with the Houston Community Chest also contributed to the subtle changes initiated by the Board of Directors. As the

⁵³ BOD minutes, January 31, 1936.

YWCA and the Community Chest battled each other in the late 1920s, the association's Board members became less enamored with the relationship with the Chest. Although it supported the YWCA's work with the branch, the Chest did not offer the same support it offered the YMCA and its African-American branch. As the YWCA members became more vocal regarding interracial cooperation, Board members became somewhat less concerned with the response of the Community Chest as evidenced in the changes made to the constitution and the Chest's response to the inclusions of an African-American woman on the Board of Directors. National conference exposure, the often tumultuous relationship with the Community Chest, and pressure from the YWCA national office contributed to a changing attitude among the Board members that ultimately led to the establishment of a voting membership on the Board of Directors for a branch representative in 1941.

The first two stages of interracial cooperation on the part of the Board of Directors and the Houston YWCA members illustrate a number of points. The YWCA addressed a pressing need during World War I to offer recreational programs for African-American women and girls in order to ease the racial tension associated with the stationing of African-American soldiers at Camp Logan. Josephine Pinyon's presence in the initial planning stage provided leadership that propelled the cooperation between African-American and white women in an effort to offer programs for all Houston women. Only with the prodding of the national YWCA office did women begin slowly crossing racial

barriers in Houston. The success of that endeavor depended on the direction of someone who was not a native Houstonian. Pinyon had to endure opposition from both men and women, yet her persistence paid off by laying a strong foundation for the slow emergence of interracial cooperation between the white Board of Directors members and women associated with the Blue Triangle Branch. It appears likely that if left to the local women, interracial cooperation might have been much slower in developing.

The influence of departmental secretaries, particularly those involved with the business and professional women's clubs, also contributed to the evolution of the Board, moving it from taking a strictly maternalistic approach to the branch to embracing a constitutional change regarding branch membership on the Board of Directors. Again, departmental secretaries were trained by the national YWCA and were not native Houstonians. The training received by the secretaries, coupled with their limited exposure to such segregation as existed in many southern cities, allowed the secretaries to challenge the Board on its racial policies.

Just as World War I brought about the first interracial endeavor by the Houston YWCA, World War II moved the association from providing the branch one non-voting membership on the Board to allowing a complete voting membership to one member of the branch Committee of Management. The local association's experiences from the war period through the depression years

provided a framework from which to advance greater interracial cooperation and understanding throughout the 1940s.

Chapter IV

INTEGRATION AND DESEGREGATION

On April 15, 1970, over 2,700 women delegates attending the Twenty-fifth National Convention of the Young Women's Christian Association avowed that the most pressing issue facing the association, as well as the world, was the issue of racism. Those attending the convention in Houston, Texas, determined that an acknowledgement of the detrimental effects of racism required action on the part of the association as a whole. The YWCA women delegates adopted the "One Imperative" at the 1970 convention and made the elimination of racism its number one objective for the year to follow.¹

The adoption of the "One Imperative" was an extension of earlier work begun by the YWCA at the 1936 national convention. At that convention delegates voted that city associations needed to create a "fellowship in which barriers of race, nationality, education and social status are broken down in the pursuit of the common objective of a better life for all." By 1946, that idea had evolved into the Interracial Charter of the YWCA, a document that stated that the organization must labor for the removal of injustice on the basis of race, whether

¹ "The YWCA's One Imperative: Eliminate Racism," adopted by the 25th National Convention of the YWCA of the U.S.A., April 1970, p. 1. SSC.

in the community, the nation, or the world. In addition, it acknowledged that “what the YWCA urged on others, it was constrained to practice itself.”²

What made the 1970 “One Imperative” unique was the way in which the association determined how to confront the issue of racism during the ever-widening civil rights revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Small steps toward racial inclusiveness had been taken by the national association throughout the 1920s and into the 1940s. Larger advances began taking place after the passage of the 1946 Interracial Charter. But with the growing strength of the civil rights movement for African Americans, as well as other groups, the National Board of the YWCA had to evaluate its racial inclusiveness policy and make advances in all regions of the country.

For many city associations, the adoption of the “One Imperative” in 1970 was the realization of progress in race relations achieved over a relatively short span of time. For others, it was an acknowledgement of how far they still had to go to become an organization open to all women regardless of race. Although the National Board adopted a policy of interracial cooperation during the early 1900s, for many southern associations the practical application of the policy only came about during the 1950s and 1960s. During the 1930s and 1940s, Jim Crow laws and years of racial prejudice and discrimination made it very difficult for southern associations to embrace national policies advocating greater racial inclusiveness of YWCA programs.

² Ibid.

Even if a city YWCA embraced and understood the interracial policies, implementation of those policies often appeared impossible. Yet many southern YWCAs attempted to develop an understanding of racial problems and often organized interracial programs within their respective communities. However, by the 1970s, the national association no longer looked upon “attempts” by southern associations as being sufficient. The National Board required action from all associations and that stance placed southern YWCAs in an even more precarious situation with the local citizens and often times their funding source.

The process by which southern YWCAs, such as the one in Houston, moved from a passive acceptance of National YWCA inclusive policies to a catalyst for change at the local level is instructive. In Houston, memos to the national office regarding visits by National Board staff members often recorded the uneasiness of local YWCA Board members in dealing with racial issues. The minutes note the apprehension of Board members in carrying out such projects as sponsoring race education seminars or participating with Blue Triangle Branch committee members in a capital campaign to fund the construction of a new Blue Triangle facility.³ National directives encouraged more frequent interaction between the white central association and the African-American branch but it is

³ Report of Headquarters Interview with Hilde Purrington, Health Education Director, Houston, Texas, by Edith Sawyer, National Services Division, July 21, 1936; Report to National YWCA from Cordelia A. Winn, Houston, Texas, March 5, 1937; Visitation Report to Division of Community YWCA's by Pauline R.V. Schaedler, March 28-29, 1949, SSC.

not clear if the Houston YWCA Board members understood what constituted interaction.

An examination of the actions taken by the Houston YWCA to advance interracial cooperation within the organization, as well as the city, brings to the forefront numerous questions. What role did the association's Board of Directors assume as the Houston YWCA attempted to adhere more fully to the racial inclusive policies of the National Board? Did the Houston association's Board members have any interracial experiences outside of the YWCA from which to measure their progress in race relations? And what about the women who sat on the Blue Triangle Branch Committee of Management? What role did they play in urging the white Board members to move more quickly in embracing the National Board's racial policies?

Before being able to evaluate the significance of the Houston YWCA's progress in race relations, it is important to understand the process by which the association came to embrace national directives for a racially inclusive organization. The Houston association moved from "studying" racial problems in the city during the 1940s, to opening its popular downtown cafeteria to all, regardless of race, in 1955. Between those years, Board members struggled to understand the concept of institutional racism and worked to build bridges among themselves, the members associated with the Blue Triangle Branch, and the community at large. Steps taken along the way included changing the association's constitution to allow for an African-American woman to sit as a full

voting member on the Board, observing the actions taken by women associated with the YWCA Business and Professional Women's clubs to break down barriers of race, to agitating for desegregation of the Houston Independent School District.

One must first explore the Houston association's attempts to understand the dynamics of racial discrimination before evaluating the local YWCA's activities, and sometimes inactivity, regarding greater racial inclusiveness in YWCA programs. It is also important to explore the National Board's progress in implementing racial inclusiveness policies at the national level. The continued insistence on the part of the National Board to push for change in its southern associations provided much needed encouragement for the Houston YWCA.

The 1940s were a watershed era for the development of racial policies by the National Board. Just as the national association honed its skills with interracial work during World War I, the experiences of women YWCA war workers during World War II provided a learning environment from which the National Board could advance its racial inclusive policy. During World War II, the United States government called upon the national YWCA to provide community leadership services through the United Services Organization (USO).⁴ YWCA women, as a result, came into frequent contact with African-American soldiers who often endured the inconsistencies of fighting for democracy while having the

⁴ The YWCA joined with numerous other agencies, such as the YMCA, to serve soldiers and their families during the war. The USO activities of the YWCA were very similar to the services the association provided during World War I.

same denied to them at home. The work of the YWCA women with the USO allowed them to see first hand the effects of racism.

As the war progressed, the National Board became more convinced of the detrimental effects of racism when confronted with the actions of Nazi Germany. Notes and memos from the national association include numerous references to the similarities between the actions of the Nazi regime in Germany and the oppression of African Americans in the United States. One report, prepared for the Meeting of the World Fellowship Committee of the National YWCA in 1942, noted that the continuing discrimination in the United States added “fuel to Nazi and Japanese propaganda.” YWCA women preparing a speech for the World Fellowship meeting commented on hearing that Adolph Hitler had more than once pointed to the treatment of African Americans in the United States as a way to minimize the attention given to his treatment of Jewish people in Nazi prison camps.⁵ The YWCA women even acknowledged that singer Paul Robeson had chosen Russia as a place where he could raise his son without the crippling effects of race prejudice. It seems likely, though, that at the same time these remarks were made, the association failed to appreciate the full effects of racism within the overall organization. While extolling the horrors of race prejudice, a

⁵ “The Role of the Colored Races in Our Post-War World,” speech presented at the Meeting of World Fellowship Committee, National Council of the YWCA, Toronto, Canada, 1942, SSC.

speaker at the World Fellowship Meeting told of large numbers of deaths among “the little brown men of the Philippines” since December 1941.⁶

It is within this context of conflicting comments about racism that the National Board of the YWCA began asking southern city associations to evaluate their overall programs in terms of racial inclusiveness. City associations, such as the one in Houston, had to evaluate their policies regarding professional staff wages, interaction between the African-American branch and the white central association, and the integration of YWCA programs. During the early 1940s, the National Board also offered greater assistance to the city associations in conducting studies of their practices and in determining how local associations could assist the community in advancing the civil rights of African Americans.

In order to determine the status of interracial cooperation within the city associations, the National Board of the YWCA commissioned a study of interracial practices in community YWCAs. Nine cities were chosen for the study, with Houston being one of the three southern cities studied. The initial impetus for the interracial study occurred in 1940 when delegates to the national convention requested the study as a way to determine if city associations were living up to the ideals being set forth by the National Board.⁷

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Interracial Practices in Community Y.W.C.A.'s: A Study Under the Auspices of the Commission to Gather Interracial Experience as Requested by the Sixteenth National Convention of the Y.W.C.A.'s of the U.S.A., 1944, pp. 1-3, SSC.

The Houston YWCA Board members cooperated fully with the national office during the interracial study. However, Board minutes from the time of the study indicate some confusion on the part of the Board members as to how to proceed with the evaluation of local programs. It is not apparent in the Board minutes whether employees, program participants, or members of the Committee of Management of the Blue Triangle Branch were able to offer much input into the study.

The National Board's study of interracial practices asked the city associations to evaluate several aspects of their overall programs. The study included an evaluation of yearly contracts for professional employees of both the white central association and the African-American branch. The National Board published reports that stressed the need of city associations to conduct surveys of their wage scales to determine if any discrepancies in pay existed between central association (white) and Branch staff members. The local Board members reviewed salaries of all professional employees on a yearly basis and included wage information in the Board minutes. As seen in the graphic below, the Houston YWCA made a distinction between pay for central association and Branch professional staff.

Table 1.

Wage Scales for Professional Staff – Houston Young Women’s Christian Association

Year		Salary
1940	Association General Secretary	\$3000/yr
	<i>Branch General Secretary</i>	<i>\$1900/yr</i>
	Association Employment Secretary	\$1760
	<i>Branch Employment Secretary</i>	<i>\$1500</i>
	Association Girl Reserve Secretary	\$2000
	<i>Branch Girl Reserve Secretary</i>	<i>\$1404</i>
1941	Association Business and Professional Secretary	\$2100
	<i>Branch Business and Professional Secretary</i>	<i>\$1500</i>
1945	Association Secretary for Employed Girls	\$2700
	<i>Branch Secretary for Employed Girls</i>	<i>\$1900</i>
	Association Secretary for Younger Girls	\$2600
	<i>Branch Secretary for Younger Girls</i>	<i>\$1800</i>
	Association General Secretary	\$3850
	Association Associate General Secretary	\$3300
1948	<i>Branch General Secretary</i>	<i>\$2800</i>
	Association Executive Director	\$5300
	<i>Branch Executive Director</i>	<i>\$3700</i>
	Program Director, Central	\$3300
	<i>Program Director, Branch</i>	<i>\$2500</i>

Information drawn from Board of Directors’ minutes, Houston YWCA, April 2, 1940, June 17, 1941, May 16, 1944, June 19, 1945, and May 7, 1948.

Arguments used by the Board for the differentiation in pay ranged from lack of professional training for branch employees, shorter time in position, to less education. However, what was not elaborated on in the discussions regarding wages was the numbers of staff members and/or girls that fell under the direction of a particular staff member. Board minutes indicate that the Branch continually operated “short-staffed” and often used volunteers for the operation of YWCA programs. Although the Board of Directors’ minutes do not provide an all-encompassing picture, the pay differentials are striking between the central association employees and branch staff members.

In addition, it is hard to make a connection between lack of funding from the Community Chest and the discrepancies in wages. Throughout the 1940s, the YWCA continually received less money from the Houston Community Chest than asked for in the yearly budget requests. Yet in 1941, the Community Chest allotted \$11,168.00 for “Colored Work” out of a total budget of \$41,376,00. In 1943, the Community Chest allotted \$9,472.00 to the Houston YWCA for work with “Negro youth” with plans for the creation of an African-American community center.⁸ The Community Chest, in essence, publicly supported the work of the Blue Triangle Branch of the Houston YWCA.

The findings of the national interracial study forced the Houston YWCA Board members to acknowledge the issue of institutional racism. After receiving

⁸ BOD minutes, October 21, 1941, and February 16, 1943.

the national report of the survey entitled "Interracial Practices in the Y.W.C.A.," the President of the Houston Board of Directors suggested that the Race Relations Committee study the report and make a presentation to the entire board at a later date. In addition, copies of the report were mailed to each of the Board members.

At issue were several sticking points for the local association, including employment of African Americans by the local YWCA and interracial cooperation between association members. One action taken by the Board in March of 1945 was to suggest that, among other things, committees that were parallel in the branch and the central association should have quarterly or semi-annual meetings to facilitate greater interracial cooperation.⁹ The decision to conduct quarterly or semi-annual meetings between groups was a step forward from what appeared to be the most obvious attempt by the Board to show interracial cooperation: the practice of having the Board meet at the Branch for its monthly meetings one or two times per year.¹⁰

When evaluating the Houston Board of Directors' approach to greater interracial cooperation, it is evident that the role taken by Board members during the 1940s seems to be one of educating themselves as well as the public on issues of race. The Board members conducted city-wide meetings, attended

⁹ BOD minutes, March 6, 1945.

¹⁰ Ibid. There are numerous instances of the Board discussing ways to facilitate interracial cooperation and coming to the conclusion that the best manner of achieving that goal would be for the Board to hold more frequent meetings at the Branch.

classes, studied pamphlets from various organizations and hosted conferences, all in an attempt to “educate” the members and the general public on racism. Board members were more comfortable with this approach because they believed that their role within the community was to be educational rather than legislative or activist.

There is evidence that the Houston YWCA Board’s approach to advancing greater interracial cooperation was popular and appealed to many individuals as well as groups. City organizations approached the Houston YWCA regarding co-sponsorship of lectures and seminars dealing with racial topics. In January 1943, the local YWCA sponsored a citywide course on Race Relations. The course was comprised of four different sessions that were taught by prominent psychologists and sociologists. An examination of the session titles provides an indication of the local YWCA’s racial focus. The titles of each session included:

Session 1 – “Race in History. What is Race?,”

Session 2 – “Science Focuses on Race,”

Session 3 – “Psychology of Race Attitudes,”

Session 4 – “The Look Ahead.”

Community leaders viewed the course as a success and even suggested that the Houston YWCA consider the possibility of conducting further courses in adult education on an annual basis.¹¹ One Board member even recommended having one of the lecturers attend a Board meeting to have an extended

¹¹ BOD Minutes, January 19, 1943.

discussion on race relations. In addition to sponsoring and attending educational conferences and workshops related to racism, the Board minutes make numerous references to suggestions from members that each Board member read many of the numerous race relations publications emanating from the National Office.

The race relations publications referred to in the Board minutes were the Public Affairs News Service Bulletins produced by the National Board. The bulletins provided city associations, such as the one in Houston, with information on how to advance the concept of racial inclusion with the local community. One such bulletin entitled "To Secure for Negroes Their Basic Civil Rights," attempted to answer questions regarding the scope of civil rights and how the YWCA could help to secure "for Negro Americans their basic civil rights."¹² The National Board elaborated that it published the bulletin with the recognition that "this is also vital as an integral part of our dedication to with the struggle for a world of free people."

The national YWCA office offered advice to Public Affairs committees of local associations on how to work toward securing basic civil rights for all citizens, particularly for African Americans. The National Board further justified its role in civil rights agitation by noting that the membership of the YWCA was rooted in both democracy and Christianity, thus it felt that it had an "inevitable

¹² Helen J. Wilkins, "To Secure for Negroes Their Basic Civil Rights " (New York: Woman's Press, 1942). SSC.

role to play in the constructive motivation of public opinion on the question of civil rights for Negroes.”¹³

Therefore, the approach to advancing better interracial cooperation taken by the Houston YWCA was very much in line with the process promoted by the National Board. Although one might be critical of the more passive approach taken by the Houston YWCA in advancing African-American civil rights, the National Board’s directives to the city associations often stressed the importance of “setting the stage” for integration.¹⁴ The women who sat on the Houston YWCA Board of Directors, many of whom were associated with prominent business and civic leaders, would have appreciated the idea of “setting a stage” for greater interracial cooperation. Failure to do so could have led to serious consequences within the community.

Along with publishing public affairs bulletins, the National Board also offered suggestions to city associations on how they could go about affecting change within their communities. The focus was primarily two-fold: making constituents aware of laws protecting African-American civil rights and the loopholes embedded within those laws, and using the association’s influence to slowly facilitate change.¹⁵ The two-pronged approach had benefited the national association during World War I and the 1920s, and the National Board drew from

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

those experiences to facilitate change in the post-World War II era. In addition, the educational approach was somewhat less controversial than direct assaults on incidences of racial discrimination.

As a result of the national study, the Houston YWCA began examining its policies regarding African-American participation on the Board of Directors. Although the Houston YWCA Board of Directors included the Chairman of the Branch Committee of Management, there were no other African-American women seated on the Board. As Board members advanced more extensive interracial activities, the Board had to evaluate its policies regarding African-American Board members.

Houston YWCA Board members began looking into the idea of having African-American representation on the Nominating Committee. This committee recommended women from the community to the sitting Board of Directors for possible election to the Board. If the nominating committee was comprised totally of white women, the chance of having an African-American woman nominated to run for election to the Board was almost non-existent.

The decision to include an African-American woman on the Nominating Committee did not come without a great deal of soul-searching by many of the Board members, as they continued to walk that fine line between education and action. Board minutes during the early 1940s continually make references to the effects of prejudice and discrimination on both those who are discriminating and those being discriminated against. Such thinking led to a discussion whereby the

Board members asked themselves to “consider carefully [their] own responsibility as a member of a Young Women’s Christian Association in this troubled world of today.” The discussion as to what the local association could do ended with the thought that all members must “put from our minds all prejudices, hatreds, and misunderstandings and think of our own shortcomings.” Later discussions revolved around the need for “tolerance, self-knowledge, and vision to realize our purpose.”¹⁶

Recognition of the need for advancing the association’s purpose did not lead to the rapid inclusion of an elected African-American woman to the Houston YWCA Board of Directors. It was not until 1951 that Mrs. Charles (Hattie Mae) White was elected to the Board of Directors. As will be seen, Hattie Mae White’s election, coupled with Mrs. Carter Wesley’s chairing of the Committee of Management of the Branch during the latter half of the 1940s, began to increase the voice of the Branch with the Board of Directors.¹⁷

Even with the Board’s sponsoring of educational programs on racism and discussions regarding tolerance and putting prejudices out of one’s mind, the time period between 1941 and 1951 did not prove to be a time of greater contact between Board members and Branch officials or participants. For the most part, contact between the two entities continued to be limited to holding Board of

¹⁶ BOD minutes, June 18, 1940 and July 15, 1941.

¹⁷ Mrs. Carter Wesley was the wife of the owner of the *Houston Informer*, an African-American newspaper in Houston. The *Houston Informer* carried articles and advertisements relating to the activities of the Blue Triangle Branch of the Houston YWCA.

Directors meetings at the Branch. In an attempt to bring about a better awareness of Branch needs, Board members suggested that the best way to broaden race experiences was to sit in on Branch meetings or contribute in some way to the Branch. There were very few references to Branch members participating in Board or central association activities. As mentioned previously, the result of discussions regarding increased racial experiences often ended with the Board determining to hold the next Board meeting at the Branch building.

The lack of contact and communication between the Board of Directors and Branch members became apparent as the Branch Committee of Management began an appeal to find a new location for the Branch. For many years, the Blue Triangle Branch building served as a center of activity for the African-American community. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Branch was housed in the African-American Odd Fellows building near downtown Houston. During July of 1940, the Committee of Management appealed to the Board to seek out a new location for the Branch, citing inadequate facilities that hampered the satisfactory execution of YWCA programs. During the same month, the Director of the Negro Housing Projects offered land to the Houston YWCA to build a new branch building.¹⁸ The decision to conduct a building campaign, however, did not materialize until the mid-1940s.

During the interim, the Branch rented a new building on the corner of Bell and Live Oak streets on the southeastern edge of downtown Houston. The

¹⁸ BOD minutes, July 1940.

Board of Directors approved of the move but the Board's assistance with the move consisted of asking the city to place a streetlight on the corner and sending a gift to the Branch.¹⁹ As for helping with the expenses of the move, the Board of Directors informed the Branch in October of 1940 that it would have to "meet the expenses of the move out of its own pocket." The central association would attempt to make up the difference if the move exceeded the budget allowance of the Branch, but there is no indication in the minutes that the Board members viewed the move as an activity that benefited or affected the local association as a whole. The response to the Committee of Management indicates a reluctance on the part of the Board to involve itself intimately into the affairs of the Branch.²⁰

The problems of the Branch continued as it quickly outgrew its temporary site and again requested a new building.²¹ The Branch Committee of Management recommended that the Board of Directors study the possibilities of financing a new building for the Branch. In January of 1944, the Board approved a study of the financial plans associated with the construction of a new Branch building.²² Two months later, the Committee of Management chairman again approached the Board about the study. At this time, the Community Chest

¹⁹ BOD minutes, October 15, 1940; November 19, 1940.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The Branch facility hosted not only branch activities, but also other community programs.

²² BOD minutes, January 18, 1944.

Director and several African-American men from the community participated in the discussion.²³

The committee decided that the construction of a Branch building was the responsibility of the total association and not the sole responsibility of the Blue Triangle Branch. Yet the acknowledgement that the Houston YWCA as a whole needed to participate in the construction of an adequate facility for the branch did not mean that the project moved more quickly toward fruition. The Board of Directors organized another committee to study the building program for the branch, only this time the committee was a bi-racial one. Even the bi-racial nature of the committee did not appear to accelerate the process toward the building campaign.²⁴

The Board of Directors' minutes indicate that in 1945 and 1946, the central association continued its study of a Branch building program. It was not until the Board approached the Community Chest to assist with a building campaign that the Houston YWCA made significant progress toward a capital campaign. In 1947, the campaign finally appeared to be underway. The President of the Houston YWCA Board asked Board members to volunteer to serve on committees for the Branch Building Campaign but there is no indication in the Board minutes that any Board member assisted with the campaign. But just as the Branch began mobilizing for the campaign, the Committee of Management

²³ BOD minutes, March 21, 1944.

²⁴ BOD minutes, December 21, 1943; January 18, 1944; March 21, 1944.

determined that they should wait a year because of two other building campaigns occurring in the city during the same year.²⁵

The Branch officially kicked off its fund-raising effort for a new building in January of 1948. The Board of Directors named two chairmen – one white and one black. The Branch, in the meantime, turned over to the Board of Directors \$1,773 for the operation of the campaign. By March of the same year, the Board stated that \$123,275 had been collected toward the construction of the Branch Building with \$50,000 coming from the African American community. However, in 1949 the Branch Building Campaign stalled and the Board of Directors' minutes lay partial blame on the men associated with the endeavor.²⁶ In an attempt to extend a goodwill offer, the Board of Directors suggested that monies from the potential sale of the YWCA building at 506 San Jacinto be used to facilitate the construction of the branch building.²⁷ The building campaign was put on hold and the final construction of the new Blue Triangle facility on McGowan Street was not completed until 1952.

²⁵ BOD minutes, July 17, 1945; May 21, 1946; November 18, 1947.

²⁶ The Board records do not include a great deal of discussion as to why they blamed the men for failing to push the campaign forward. The lack of records from the Blue Triangle Branch hinder a greater understanding regarding the relationship of the men leading the building campaign. What is indicated is that there was less energy put into the Blue Triangle branch campaign than there was when the central association raised money for a new activities center and residence after World War I.

²⁷ BOD minutes, March 15, 1948 and July 19, 1949.

The difficulties with the Branch Building campaign are indicative of the problems that often existed between the Board of Directors and the Branch participants, particularly during the 1940s. Although the Board minutes illustrate some type of interracial cooperation between the two entities, actions toward advancing the position of the Blue Triangle Branch within the city often proceeded at a pace dictated by the Board of Directors. The Branch Committee of Management had to present documentation to the Board of Directors before proceeding with a program. The women sitting on the Board of Directors played a crucial role in the implementation of YWCA programs with the African-American community.

The Board of Directors continued to wrestle with how to bridge the gap between the branch and the central association as the Houston YWCA moved into the 1950s. During that decade, changes began to occur that brought the local association more in line with national directives on race relations. The local association began restructuring itself into a Metropolitan association with three branches; Downtown, Blue Triangle, and Magnolia Park.²⁸ In 1951, the Board of Directors accepted the first African American woman elected to the Board, Hattie Mae White. By 1953 she had become the Recording Secretary for the Board and a member of the Executive Committee, a position that she held from 1953

²⁸ The change to a metropolitan association de-emphasized the downtown YWCA as the primary association and placed greater emphasis in serving various sections of the Houston community.

to 1957. And the Board progressed even further in making all association standing committees racially inclusive.²⁹

In regard to race relations, the year 1955 proved to be a crucial year for the Houston YWCA. Much of the impetus for the change in the local association's inclusiveness policies originated with the National Board. The National YWCA hosted its Centennial Convention in New York in June of 1955 and several delegates from the Houston association attended the convention. The emphasis of the convention was on continuing the move toward greater inclusion of differing groups into the overall YWCA program. Upon their return from the national convention, delegates related to other Board members the importance of breaking down the barriers that existed between the white and African-American YWCA members.³⁰

In what appears to be a rather abrupt move, the Board decided to take the step that had been advocated by the National Board for many years. It made the Houston YWCA facilities open to all members of the association regardless of race. This included the very popular downtown YWCA cafeteria. The motion passed by the Board simply stated "That any member of the YWCA of Houston is privileged to use any facility of any Branch."³¹ Nothing in the Board minutes

²⁹ Letter from Thelma Mills, Houston Metropolitan Executive Director to Miss Florence Harris, Action Plan Consultant, Community Division, National Board of the YWCA, New York, 1964. HMRC.

³⁰ Ibid.

indicate that the motion caused discord among the Board members or that the women spent an inordinate amount of time discussing the ramifications of their actions. The motion was made, seconded, and passed.

Considering the difficulties that the Board of Directors had experienced throughout the 1940s and early 1950s regarding interracial cooperation, one needs to explore the context in which the decision was made to determine why the Board took the action it did and why it came about at that particular time. Much of the initial impetus for change in the Board's racial views stemmed from the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka*. Prior to the June convention, the Board members determined that one of the priorities for the upcoming year had to be the provision of more opportunities for people of the various branches to work together. Citing the *Brown* case, the Board stated that it needed to "aid the community in creating a climate in which the recent decision of the Supreme Court can be implemented through development of program which provides for understanding among all races."³² Although the Board members tabled attempts to move further, they continued to discuss how to more actively pursue full racial integration of the YWCA and how to further advance African-American civil rights within the community at large.

In addition, the National Office produced a workbook entitled "Inclusiveness" that it forwarded to each of the local associations. At the

³¹ Ibid.

³² BOD minutes, January 25, 1955.

February 22 meeting of the Houston Board of Directors, members of the Board and staff joined in a discussion as to how to interpret the new directives from National. After the discussion, Kathryn Fasnacht, a YWCA appointee to the United Nations Council, expressed her hope that “the Board of Directors would work toward the time when all of its facilities would be available to all of its members in specifically the cafeteria, pool and residence.”³³

That time for the Houston YWCA officially arrived on June 28, 1955. The task committee that had been chosen to review the local association’s policies as they related to the National Board directives presented its findings at the monthly Board of Directors meeting. The chair of the committee prefaced her statements with a reference back to the January discussion on how to best implement the spirit of change presented in the *Brown* decision of the Supreme Court. The committee moved that “the Houston YWCA establish a policy of an integrated membership” (which means that any member of the YWCA of Houston is privileged to use any facility of any branch).³⁴ The statement led to a discussion on how the policy change would affect the local association as well as the community as a whole. Many of the questions presented revolved around the existence of laws against the policy, the possible loss of revenue from the

³³ BOD minutes, February 22, 1955.

³⁴ BOD minutes, June 28, 1955.

cafeteria, and how integration would affect the swimming pool, Saturday night dances, teenage activities, and the residence.³⁵

The responses to these questions illustrate an interesting perception on the part of the Board members. One Board member pointed out that there were no laws against full racial integration of facilities, only customs that made it appear that way. Each member believed that the Houston YWCA had to do the best job possible and stand behind its convictions about racial inclusiveness. Another Board member pointed out that a church had successfully integrated its vacation Bible school and four interracial scouting troops existed within the city. It was time for the YWCA to make a move. The minutes included comments from Board members including, "Why wait? We've been too slow."³⁶

It is also evident, however, that the Board still lacked full understanding of what the National Board meant by racial inclusiveness. When discussing how integration would affect the cafeteria and swimming pool, one unidentified Board member noted that "Negroes are sensitive and considerate and few would barge in where not wanted." The Board unanimously voted to adopt the integration policy with no Board member refraining from voting.³⁷

Once the historic vote had been taken, the process of determining how to best implement the new policy began. The questions were numerous. How did

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

the association go about integrating its facilities? How did it notify the membership of a change in policy? Should the general public be notified of the integration of YWCA facilities? Each question presented its own set of problems. The Board started the process by notifying each of the branches of its decision regarding full racial integration of all Houston YWCA facilities. The Downtown Branch accepted the policy and asked that a letter be sent to the whole membership informing them of the change in policy. Board members hesitated at the recommendation. The United Fund, from which the Houston YWCA received a large share of its funding, had just begun its annual campaign and many of the Board members were concerned that the issuance of a letter pertaining to racial integration might have serious repercussions. Instead of jeopardizing the campaign for both the YWCA and other United Fund agencies, Board members believed it wise to delay a public announcement until the conclusion of the campaign. The announcement of the policy change did not occur until December 1, 1955.³⁸

The Blue Triangle Branch responded to the integration announcement by requesting a conference of both the Branch Committee of Management and the Board of Directors in order to determine how to best implement the change. Board members agreed to the meeting. On November 7, 1955, the Board of Directors sat down with the Committees of Administration of the three Branches to discuss ways to make the integration of facilities proceed smoothly. The

³⁸ The discussion relating to the policy change was recording in the September 27, 1955, Board minutes.

groups believed that integration could readily work in such programs as study groups, forums, and music. Problem areas, though, would be the cafeteria, the residence, and modern and social dancing classes and events. Board members provided suggestions on the positive steps that could be taken in implementing the new policy. They believed that the easiest steps to take involved continuing the integrated leadership training in all of the departments and to continue integrating the staff.³⁹

YWCA classes seemed to provide the best opportunity for integration without garnering too much publicity. Suggestions included having staff members from each Branch identify participating members who believed in the new YWCA policy and have them join classes at one of the other branches. Of particular interest was the statement “Don’t work too hard at it.” The Electors’ Assembly (an assembly consisting of dues-paying YWCA members) pointed out that the policy should be made known and that the members should have faith and trust in God that it would work out. The Electors’ Assembly also indicated that it would not be as difficult as many thought and that integration of the facilities would not present many problems.⁴⁰

The Electors’ assembly offered a word of caution to the Board—do not form too many committees to “work at integration.” YWCA members felt that it

³⁹ BOD minutes, November 7, 1955.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

would only bog down the process.⁴¹ Further suggestions from the Electors' Assembly included using free television time on the local Public Television station to inform members and the general public of the new policy and to use "picture" publicity of integrated YWCA events and activities. They cautioned about making what it referred to as a "big newspaper splash or splurge" to announce the policy thus making it appear to be an "issue."⁴²

After listening to the suggestions of the Electors' Assembly members, the Board struggled with the question, "where do we go from here?" Board members outlined five areas to target for integration. First, the Branches would solicit members in geographic areas who would willingly participate in racially integrated programs and then interpret the results as they proceeded. Board members realized that when treading on new ground, they would have to evaluate the process as it happened. Secondly, dance and swimming classes would be integrated. Board members noted that two African-American women were already participating in the Downtown Branch Modern Dance Class. The swimming classes would be integrated with the presentation of a health certificate and the payment of fees. The Board targeted music groups as a way to publicize the integration of its facilities in a positive way. Work had already begun on an integrated chorus to sing at the local World Fellowship services.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

The Board of Directors believed it was imperative to seek out talent for leadership in all groups. The Branches needed to integrate their instructors as the Board felt that "one will attend where there is confidence that he [sic] will receive the most from the instructors."⁴³ Once the association had singled out those members who were willing to play a leadership role in the racial integration of the association, Board members believed that the integrated programs would progress at a much faster rate.

The full integration of the cafeteria, however, proved to be the most problematic for the association. The YWCA cafeteria provided the largest percentage of income for the association outside of United Fund monies. It was also the most public of all integration endeavors. The downtown YWCA cafeteria was a very popular eating establishment for business people, both male and female, and the local association ran the risk of losing a significant portion of its clientele once integration took place. Board members believed that integration of the facilities had to proceed openly and naturally. In order to cause the least amount of controversy, the Board planned to have committee groups use the cafeteria for meetings, allowing the various groups to integrate the facility slowly and carefully. The Board made the decision to integrate the cafeteria immediately. They notified the cafeteria manager of the change in policy and proceeded as instructed.⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 4-5.

Board minutes give a picture of a very smooth process of integration. However, the minutes are somewhat misleading. For the first twenty months after opening the cafeteria to all men and women, regardless of race, integration appeared to proceed without any problems. Then in July of 1957 the Houston YWCA faced a challenge from local citizens affiliated with the White Citizens Council. Several members of the White Citizens Council forwarded letters to the United Fund stating that they would no longer support the United Fund, and would encourage their friends to do the same, unless the YWCA ceased serving African Americans in the cafeteria. Chester Ridge, the Executive Director of the United Fund of Houston notified the local YWCA of the letters.⁴⁵

The Houston YWCA was without an Executive Director at the time of the complaints and feared that the organization was vulnerable to attacks. The United Fund provided some comfort to the organization by investigating those making the complaints and determining that the YWCA critics were not large supporters of the United Fund.⁴⁶ But publicity concerning the complaints could call more attention to the YWCA and the United Fund and had the potential of causing serious damage. Board of Director members maintained their composure and refused to act until the new Executive Director arrived.

Thelma Mills, the new Executive Director of the Houston YWCA, took her position on September 3, 1957. She immediately called a meeting with YWCA

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Board members, Chester Ridge, and other United Fund officials to be briefed on the situation. The timing of the attacks on the YWCA were critical as the United Fund drive would begin later in the year and the attacks threatened to undermine the campaign. Although he had comforted YWCA Board members in the absence of Mills, Ridge still pushed for a decision regarding whether or not the Houston YWCA would continue with its integrated cafeteria policy. Ridge wanted that decision by September 6, 1957. Board members felt that a September 6 deadline was unrealistic and unfair to Mills, as she “hadn’t learned the power structure in the community or in the United Fund.”⁴⁷

Thelma Mills called a second meeting of the YWCA Board of Directors on September 6 and members briefed her on the history of the cafeteria policy. Board members pointed out that the local association postponed the opening of the cafeteria to African-American patrons and refrained from making any public announcement about the integration of the facility until after the yearly United Fund drive in order to lessen any negative repercussions.⁴⁸

During the meeting, Board members argued that the cafeteria policy had been in effect for almost two years without any serious incidents and that the income from the cafeteria had not declined. Further arguments revolved around the belief that no agency or organization should be pressured by an outside group, including the United Fund, into doing something that went against the

⁴⁷ Houston Record of Desegregation and Integration, prepared by Thelma Mills, Executive Director of the Houston YWCA, February, 1964, p. 6. HMRC.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

stated purpose of that organization. Some Board members suggested that the YWCA close the cafeteria to the general public and only serve its members and related groups or agencies. The problem seemed too large, though, for a quick decision so the YWCA Board notified Ridge and the United Fund, indicating that it needed more time to review the situation. Board members moved to organize a committee to study the cafeteria issue prior to the next regularly scheduled Board meeting on September 24.

As the committee began its study, the YWCA found that the spread of news concerning the criticism of the association's cafeteria policy actually brought the association more help than expected. Thelma Mills' report makes mention of the fact that "influential men in the community called to offer encouragement and support."⁴⁹ The advertising director of a large firm told a Board member "in our position we should take no action, simply stand firm."⁵⁰ Other prominent men in the city met with Mills and the President of the Board of Directors. They were concerned with the autonomy of agencies relying on United Fund monies and recommended to the YWCA that they follow the suggestion of the advertising director and simply stand firm on the cafeteria policy.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵¹ BOD minutes, September 6, 1957.

The unexpected support from prominent men in the community apparently helped to strengthen the resolve of the Board members. At the September 24 Board of Directors meeting, Board members decided to continue with the integrated cafeteria policy because of their stated belief in the YWCA policy of inclusiveness. The decision, however, involved a great deal of discussion on the purpose of the inclusive policy and the reality of the actual interracial nature of the cafeteria patronage.

Several questions brought up by Board members provide insights into how purpose and economics melded together in the Board's decision. Questions ranged from "Are we in agreement that we can't ride out the present situation?" to "How are our present clients going to react to the closing of the YWCA cafeteria to the public?" Each question seemed to fit into one of three categories: financial, policy on inclusiveness, or food service. Evidently the complaints about the integrated cafeteria were only the tip of the iceberg as the Board found that those making the complaints not only wanted to change the policy of the YWCA cafeteria, but also to eliminate "any mixing of the races." The United Fund told the Board that a change in the cafeteria policy would probably end the attacks on the YWCA but Board members believed that the attacks on the United Fund would not stop because other organizations receiving monies from the Fund were also integrated agencies.⁵²

⁵² Mills, *Houston Record of Desegregation and Integration*, p. 8.

An analysis of the YWCA finances revealed that only thirty-one percent of the YWCA programs were self-supporting and the association needed the continued financial backing of the United Fund. However, the Board also went on record that it stood behind its policy of inclusiveness. At the September 24, 1957, meeting the Board approved two recommendations regarding the YWCA's inclusiveness policy. First, Board members voted to continue operating an integrated cafeteria yet they would not bring any further attention to the association. Secondly, and possibly more telling regarding the Board's dedication to its policy of inclusiveness, they decided that Board approval must be obtained prior to any further actions taken in implementing the inclusiveness policy. In other words, social activities such as swimming and dancing would not be integrated at that time.⁵³

The Board then prepared a statement to be given out by staff members when they received phone calls asking about the YWCA's inclusiveness policy. One sample question given to staff members by the Board was "How many come?" (meaning how many African Americans patronized the cafeteria). The answer to be given shows the difficulties inherent in the Board's attempts to break through the walls of prejudice. Staff members were to respond to the question by saying, "only a negligible number have eaten in the cafeteria (our

⁵³ Ibid., p. 10.

colored members have not abused in any way the privilege granted them by coming in great numbers).”⁵⁴

Although the Board decided to stand its ground as it related to the cafeteria policy, the statement regarding the number of African Americans using the cafeteria makes it appear that the new inclusiveness policy adopted in 1955 was implemented so quietly that the effect was negligible. Yet the organization, when confronted, did remain committed to the integrated cafeteria.

If the numbers of African Americans using the cafeteria were small, then what was the catalyst for the attacks by the White Citizens Council? The timing seems to point to something outside of the YWCA, in particular, the desegregation of Houston Independent School District. Hattie Mae White, a member of the Houston YWCA Board of Directors, played a prominent role in the early battles over desegregation. The city of Houston experienced several years of turmoil after the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka*. It was not, however, the first challenge to segregation within the city.

For Houston, the issue of desegregation came to the forefront in 1950 when a small group of African-American business and professional men challenged the city for equal access to public facilities in Houston, namely one of the public golf courses. When the court ruled against them, the editor of *The Informer*, Carter Wesley, whose wife was a prominent member of the Blue Triangle Branch, wrote a profound piece that stated “the decision proves that

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Negro citizens must resign themselves to fight every step of the way if they ever hope to enjoy the full benefits of citizenship.”⁵⁵ The editorial from 1950 showed that Houston was far from the “Heavenly Houston” advertised in the same newspaper approximately thirty years previous. For African-American Houstonians, the 1940s through the 1960s proved to be a tumultuous decade in a battle to achieve basic civil rights.

The Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka*, sent a shockwave through Houston as the city contemplated how to either abide by the Court’s decision or find ways to avoid it and continue operating a segregated school system. The election of Hattie Mae White as the first African American to the Houston School Board provides one of the more interesting stories associated with the battle to desegregate Houston Independent School District and ties the Houston YWCA to the struggle over desegregation.

According to William Henry Kellar’s book, *Make Haste Slowly: Moderates, Conservatives, and School Desegregation in Houston*, White was only the second African American elected to public office since the end of Reconstruction. She participated in the Race Relations Committee of the Council of Churches of Greater Houston and had also been a member of the Board of the Houston Association for Better Schools, which was an integrated community organization. In addition, she delivered a speech to the Houston school board in 1956

⁵⁵ William Henry Keller, *Make Haste Slowly: Moderates, Conservatives, and School Desegregation in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), p. 43.

concerning the poor condition of African-American schools in Houston.⁵⁶ She joined the Houston School Board in 1958 and it was during that time that she contemplated and actually conducted the campaign for election that the YWCA came under attack for its cafeteria policy. Although neither Kellar nor the Board of Directors' minutes from the YWCA make a connection between the two events, the timing of the attack on the YWCA's cafeteria policy calls into question the motivation of the members of the White Citizens Council.

White did not contemplate running for the position until after she presented a speech before the Board regarding the implementation of *Brown*. It was after her speech to the HISD Board that she decided to run for the school board. Although White served two terms on the HISD Board and her election to that Board was historic, one has to wonder if her experience with the YWCA helped her to understand the importance of continuing to push forward in race relations even in the face of overwhelming odds. And one also has to wonder how much influence women such as Hattie Mae White and Mrs. Carter (Doris Wooten) Wesley had on the decision of the Houston YWCA Board of Directors to integrate all of its facilities in 1955.

As the Houston YWCA moved forward with the full racial integration of its facilities, Houston became the focus of greater civil rights activities. During March of 1960, the city of Houston experienced its first sit-in protest of segregated lunch counters. In an attempt to avoid the publicity associated with

⁵⁶ Ibid.

the sit-ins, many of the local businesses opted to remove their lunch counters all together rather than serve African-American patrons. The Houston Retail Merchants Association attempted to avert problems by suggesting the appointment of a bi-racial committee to study the problem with race relations within the city, but the committee achieved very little. The sit-in movement continued until September 1960 when nine major businesses in the Houston area opened their lunch counters to African Americans. The merchants opted to use the same strategy used by the Houston YWCA when it opened its cafeteria to African Americans in 1955, meaning that there was no real coverage of the event in the press.⁵⁷

The opening of the YWCA cafeteria in 1955 meant that the association not only avoided the negative publicity associated with the sit-in movement, but it also offered a model for other organizations to follow. The fact that few African Americans used the YWCA cafeteria for the first two years after integration must be considered, but at least the association was able quietly to open its facility and weather attacks by critics. Instead of caving in to the demands of the White Citizens Council and the fears of decreased funding from the United Fund, the women associated with the Houston YWCA Board of Directors stood by the purpose of the organization. If the Board had not received the support of major businessmen in the community, one has to wonder if it would have continued to operate an integrated cafeteria.

⁵⁷ Keller, p. 119.

Once the association weathered the storm of negative publicity in 1957, it began to move more quickly toward full integration of all YWCA facilities. The Board, though, continued to proceed more cautiously than the Blue Triangle Branch members felt necessary. In 1959, the Blue Triangle Committee of Administration sent a memo to the Board of Directors, urging its members to take steps necessary to implement fully the decision of 1955. The language of the memo indicates that the Committee of Administration of the Blue Triangle Branch had decided to be more vocal in the move toward greater integration of the Houston YWCA facilities and programs. In one of the more telling sections of the memo, the Committee of Administration suggested that the association “not accept any contributions which would tie its hand to proceed in any way toward the realization of its ultimate goals . . .”⁵⁸

In another memo from the Committee of Administration to the President of the Houston YWCA Board of Directors, the committee asked what plan the association had for the housing of African-American girls in the new residence. Evidently the Branch committee members had become frustrated with the hesitancy of the Board of Directors because they included in the memo the statement that “it is our thinking that these questions arise out of a need to be able to frankly discuss perhaps the most difficult problem the Association has to meet at this time.”⁵⁹ It was not until 1961 that African American women, other

⁵⁸ Memo from the Blue Triangle Committee of Administration to the Houston YWCA Board of Directors, November 24, 1959, HMRC.

than YWCA staff and conference and workshop members, were finally housed in the YWCA residence, Helen Thompson Hall. In January 1964, Helen Thompson Hall residents voted to have African-American women serving on the Residence Committee.⁶⁰

The Houston YWCA struggled through the 1940s and 1950s to come to terms with the National Board policies of racial integration. A maturation process had to take place in order for the white women on the Board of Directors to feel comfortable about taking the necessary steps to move a southern city association toward a policy that included the housing of African-American women in an integrated residence and the opening of a cafeteria to all patrons regardless of race. The Committee of Administration of the Blue Triangle Branch also took years before finding a voice within the local association. Although it had many women participating in interracial organizations at both the local and national level, the Houston YWCA struggled to move beyond the more passive educational approach to work actively for the improvement of race relations. What is apparent, though, is the fact that the Houston YWCA proceeded toward racial integration faster than most organizations operating within the city of Houston.

Even though Board members struggled with each decision regarding greater racial integration of the Houston YWCA, Board minutes indicate that after

⁵⁹ Memo from the Blue Triangle Committee of Administration to the Houston YWCA Board of Directors, November 10, 1959, HMRC.

⁶⁰ Mills, *Houston Record of Desegregation and Integration*, p. 10.

the historic decision to open its cafeteria to African-American patrons, the YWCA continued to move forward to embrace even more controversial issues. The 1960s would bring the organization into greater contact with Hispanic women and women from a much lower socio-economic group. Surviving the attacks associated with the YWCA's racial policy appeared to strengthen the resolve of the Board members to tackle additional social problems and to participate in many of the Great Society programs of the 1960s and 1970s.

CHAPTER V

THE HOUSTON YWCA AND GREAT SOCIETY PROGRAMS

The decade of the 1960s found the Houston YWCA continuing its focus on improved race relations in the city while at the same time taking steps toward greater involvement in local social service activities. Although Board of Directors' minutes from the late 1950s and early 1960s continued to mention the need for greater attempts at full racial integration of YWCA facilities, local Board members began focusing on the major political and social issues making headlines across the country. Found in the Board minutes were comments relating to the actions of Martin Luther King, Jr., the often tumultuous events associated with the African-American civil rights movement, and attempts by the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson presidential administrations to address the inequities inherent in American society.

Growing support for the civil rights movement across the country, the social unrest of the decade, and Americans' "rediscovery" of poverty during the 1960s all had a profound impact on the YWCA at the national level. Attempts to come to terms with the changing fabric of U.S. society led the National Board to take the necessary steps to build upon its racial inclusive policy while at the same time actively supporting the social initiatives of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. As an outward sign of its move toward greater racial inclusiveness, the National Board elected its first African-American president in

1967. In addition, it provided financial support for the 1963 March on Washington and, through directives to the local associations, pushed for a greater understanding of civil rights issues. It also stressed the importance of local associations bringing their operational policies in line with national goals.

But how did local YWCAs interpret the directives from the National Board and what initiatives did they take to make the directives palatable to local citizens? And more importantly, for the Houston YWCA, what adjustments did the local Board of Directors make to accelerate a shift toward a more social service orientation? The strengthening of the civil rights movement, coupled with the initiation of anti-poverty programs under the Johnson administration, provided the local YWCA with opportunities to interact with a very different segment of the Houston population than it had in previous decades.

During the 1960s, the Houston YWCA continued to struggle with implementation of its policy requiring full racial integration of all facilities and programs. At the same time, the Board of Directors noted a growing unrest among minority groups within the city as well as the nation. Racial discrimination remained the focus of the Houston YWCA but the local association began aligning itself more with the emerging war on poverty through the 1960s and early 1970s. Just as it did during the economic depression of the 1930s, the local association found itself involved in federal programs designed to alleviate or minimize the effects of poverty in Houston. During the 1960s, though, the

involvement with social service programs began to effect adversely Houston YWCA membership totals and financial stability.

This chapter explores the almost frenetic activities of the Houston YWCA during the decade of the 1960s. The two areas of focus, racial integration and social work, melded together for the local association as it became an active participant in the War on Poverty. Oftentimes, agencies not affiliated with the YWCA requested the Houston YWCA's participation in various programs. The local association's experiences through the Depression era and World War II made it a logical choice to take on some of the programs aimed at ending poverty in the United States. Participation in those programs moved the association into contact with women from a much different socio-economic background and extended a greater number of programs to women of color.

In addition, for the Houston YWCA, participation in War on Poverty programs provided the organization with additional funding at a time when it was struggling financially. But the association quickly found out that the monies available often did not meet the need and were often slow in coming. As the Houston YWCA moved into the 1970s, the association often continued to offer programs in low-income sections of town with rapidly dwindling resources.

Many critics of War on Poverty programs point out that they lacked focus and adequate funding to make them successful.¹ The Board minutes of the

¹ See James Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper,

Houston YWCA during the decade echo that lack of focus. At any given time, the local association involved itself in everything from conducting a letter writing campaign to secure a school of social work in Houston, to teaching English as a second language courses and offering day care and after-school programs, to housing Job Corps graduates while at the same time continuing the fight to end racial discrimination. What follows is an account of the actions taken by the local YWCA and an elaboration on how each activity illustrated the Houston association's beliefs regarding the role of a women's organization in social reform during the 1960s.

Historians have found it difficult to assess the impact of many anti-poverty programs as is seen with the ongoing debates regarding the successes and failures of the War on Poverty. It is equally difficult to ascertain the impact the Houston YWCA had on city-wide anti-poverty efforts. For this study, evaluating the success or failure of each endeavor is not the primary focus. Instead, it is the understanding on the part of the national and local YWCA as to what role the organization should play in attempting to ameliorate the poverty problem, particularly as it affected women and girls. The shift in focus to anti-poverty programs for the Houston YWCA occurred very early in the 1960s. The anti-poverty focus, coupled with the continuing efforts to break down barriers of racial prejudice, made the association a prime candidate to join in the local War on Poverty.

1986); Sar A. Levitan and Robert Taggart, "The Great Society Did Succeed," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (Winter, 1976–1977), pp. 601–618.

After making the decision to stand its ground in the face of attacks associated with the racial integration of its cafeteria, the Houston YWCA Board of Directors began in the 1960s to evaluate the association's overall program to determine the course of action for the upcoming decade.² During 1960, the Houston Board began planning a capital campaign to raise money for local YWCA programs. The Board indicated a desire to publicize the importance of the YWCA to the Houston community as part of the fund raising strategy. Board members pointed out that the work undertaken by the local YWCA "had to be done whether it was the YWCA or another organization doing the work." In addition, the Board stressed that it had been offering much needed services to the community for many years and that the social work performed by the Houston association was "a vital necessity to a growing city like Houston."³

In May of 1961, the Board of Directors announced the points of emphases for the triennium 1961–1964. Board members decided to place particular emphasis on encouraging and supporting U.S. participation in the United Nations, the need for economic and social justice, and the protection of basic individual rights and liberties. The interests of the local Board were not out of line with the overall emphases of the National Board of the YWCA. During the 1960s, the national association adopted a broad program that included embracing the actions of the United Nations and advocating U.S. support for

² See information on integration of the Houston YWCA cafeteria in Chapter IV.

³ BOD minutes, November 20, 1960.

United Nations' agencies, long-range creation of programs for newly-developing areas, long-range reciprocal trade agreements, multilateral control of armaments, and even the use of space for peaceful purposes only.⁴

The domestic focus of President Lyndon Johnson, however, in some way altered the intentions of the YWCA, particularly at the local level. Even though the association, at both the national and local levels, continued to support international endeavors, such as U.S. participation in the U.N., the YWCA began engaging itself with the War on Poverty. By doing so, the national YWCA stayed thoroughly enmeshed in the activities of the civil rights movement while facilitating the implementation of anti-poverty programs.

Based upon the emphases adopted in 1961, the Houston YWCA identified areas where it could provide guidance and assistance to local citizens. The economic and social justice focus of the Houston association supported equal employment opportunities for women, as well as equal pay for equal work. Improvements to both public and private housing, federal aid to public education, higher standards of living for migrant workers, and finding solutions to the juvenile delinquency problem also interested the Houston Board of Directors. The local YWCA expanded its position on racial inclusiveness by supporting programs designed to allow for the full participation of minority groups in all phases of community and national life. Those initiatives included allowing for

⁴ BOD minutes, May 23, 1961.

equal justice before the law, the establishment of effective legal safeguards against mob violence, and the protection of voting rights for all citizens.⁵

An awareness of the Houston YWCA's emphases and resolutions during the first half of the 1960s is important for two significant reasons. First, the local association wished to make its concerns known to the National Board during the first half of the 1960s in an effort to help direct national programs. It is quite evident in the Board minutes that the local Board of Directors desired greater interaction with the National Board. It was during the 1960s that Houston sent a representative to the National Board, Doris Wooten Wesley. In addition, the local YWCA had begun its efforts to host a national YWCA conference in Houston.

Second, the resolutions helped the local association determine the course of action for the years ahead. The experience with the integration of the YWCA cafeteria provided Board members with a greater understanding of the importance of planning. Even though much of the controversy surrounding the racial integration of the cafeteria had subsided by the end of the 1950s, by the early 1960s the local Board had begun receiving more criticism about its racial inclusiveness stance. Board of Directors' minutes indicate that Board members believed they had to justify their stance on racial issues. The May 23, 1961, minutes noted Board members' comments that the YWCA was the largest organization of women in the world and that "people may not always agree with us, but if we have the facts before us we have something to stand on." Another

⁵ Ibid.

Board member asserted that the “YWCA is more than classes in swimming and making hats.”⁶

During the first half of the 1960s, the National Board continued to stress the importance of removing racial barriers. In 1960, the National Board set up a fund, known as the National Student YWCA Legal Aid and Scholarship Fund, to aid those arrested in the various sit-ins across the country. The Houston Board of Directors, when contacted by the national office, agreed to send funds to the national office in support of those arrested. This move was in line with previous actions taken by the Houston YWCA Board regarding racial issues. Local Board members kept themselves very well informed of the civil rights movement at both the local and national level and participated in educational programs associated with the movement. Efforts to stay informed of civil rights activities included, among other things, the attendance of several Houston YWCA Board members at a meeting for presidents, association executives, YWCA committees of administration, and branch executives held in Memphis, Tennessee. The Houston YWCA also deemed it important enough to send the association’s Executive Director, Thelma Mills.

As an outgrowth of its attempts to stay abreast of civil rights initiatives, the local association began sponsoring programs in 1963 aimed at teaching the public about recurring civil rights issues. One example of a YWCA-sponsored event was a luncheon meeting at the association’s downtown facility with John S.

⁶ Ibid.

Lash of Texas Southern University as the guest speaker. Lash's topic was "The Status of the Negro in Houston."⁷ YWCA Board members believed it to be their responsibility to educate themselves, as well as Houston citizens, about the problems faced by African-American residents in the city. This approach to dealing with controversial topics allowed the organization to take a political stand without alienating its constituents.

The Public Affairs Committee of the Houston YWCA had the responsibility of keeping Board members up to date on legal actions taken on the national level to end racial discrimination. During a June 1963 Board of Directors' meeting, the Public Affairs Committee made a presentation regarding the problems associated with limitations on minority voting, in particular, the use of poll taxes to exclude African-American voters. The Houston Board went on record taking a position in support of the repeal of poll taxes as a requirement for voting.⁸ As was often the case, though, the Board minutes did not mention what further action the local Board took regarding voting restrictions against African Americans.

By the mid-1960s, the local associations had a central office from which to draw resources in their fight against racism. As mentioned previously, actions taken by the Houston YWCA regarding racial integration and support for policies advocating an end to racial discrimination were local extensions of the position taken by the National Board in New York. In an effort to better support programs

⁷ Lash was a member of the sociology department at Texas Southern University.

⁸ BOD Minutes, June 22, 1963.

to eliminate racism, the National Board organized the Office of Racial Justice in 1965 and placed it under the direction of Dorothy Height.⁹ The Office of Racial Justice began a campaign against minority discrimination both within the YWCA and society as a whole. The National Board provided \$200,000 in support of the Racial Justice initiatives. By 1967 the National YWCA had strengthened its resolve to bring an end to racial discrimination within the organization by passing a constitutional amendment that proclaimed “if an Association is not fully integrated in policy and practice and thereby living up to the statement of purpose, it would be disaffiliated.”¹⁰

By the end of the 1960s the Houston Board of Directors had taken additional steps to bring itself in line with racial directives from the National Board and to further the cause of ending racism in Houston. The Program Development Committee noted in 1968 that the Houston YWCA needed to continue its focus on racial integration. The committee pointed out that as it worked toward the goal of racial integration the association would encounter increasing tensions and a variety of pressures from individuals and organizations. Despite the difficulties, the association agreed that it had to

⁹ Dorothy Height was a major catalyst in the movement of the National Board of the YWCA toward an insistence on greater interracial cooperation among local associations. An African-American woman, Height had previously worked as the director of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA in Washington, D.C., had served as the Secretary of Interracial Education for the National Board of the YWCA, and served on President John F. Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women.

¹⁰ Report from the 1967 National YWCA convention, SSC.

strengthen its commitment toward integration and use a wide range of methods to make integration a reality.

The Houston YWCA stressed the importance of “dialogues” to bring people together to discuss problems with racism. Such action was especially important during 1967 and 1968 as social unrest in the city exploded with a riot at Texas Southern University.¹¹ The YWCA began holding “Dialogue” programs in 1968 to discuss numerous controversial issues associated with the social unrest of the late 1960s. After the Texas Southern riot, the local association held a dialogue session on “Police and Police Brutality.” The Houston Council on Human Relations assisted the YWCA with the program and the panel included the Chairman of the Grand Jury Association, a Captain from the Houston Police Department, and a representative from Human, Organizational, Political, Economic (HOPE). Based on information provided in the YWCA records, the programs were popular as the dialogue session on police brutality had over 140 attendees.¹²

¹² Evidently the issue of police brutality was an ongoing irritation among the African-American community. Attempts were made by War on Poverty workers to organize residents in the Settegast neighborhood to protest police brutality. See Thomas R. Cole, *No Color Is My Color: The Life of Eldrewey Stearns and the Integration of Houston* (Austin: University of Texas Press), and William Clayson, “Texas Poverty and Liberal Politics: The Office of Economic Opportunity and the War on Poverty in the Lone Star State,” Ph.D. dissertation, Texas Tech University, 2001.

Other dialogue topics included such issues as welfare and public housing.¹³ Board members expressed their belief that it was “extremely important to get ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ together and talking.”¹⁴ The local association contacted the National YWCA office for assistance in establishing and running the dialogues but the Board members after a month-long wait expressed concerns at a lack of response from the national office.¹⁵

The local association received an invitation from the Community Welfare Planning Association to attend a June 5, 1968, public forum meeting on “Urban Crisis and Civil Disorders.” The President of the Board of Directors, Jean Childers, encouraged members to attend the public forum because it would help them to understand better the so-called Kerner report.¹⁶ YWCA Board members each received copies of the Kerner document, and the Board held several meetings to discuss the findings included in the report. According to the Kerner

¹³ BOD minutes, June 25, 1968.

¹⁴ BOD minutes, April 30, 1968.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ BOD minutes, May 28, 1968. In 1967, President Johnson appointed the Kerner Commission (headed by Illinois Governor Otto Kerner and made up of business, political and civil rights leaders) to explore the reasons for social unrest among the various ethnic groups in the United States. President Johnson wanted to know if the riots in cities such as Los Angeles, Newark, and Detroit had been spontaneous uprisings or orchestrated efforts planned by outside agitators. The Kerner Report concluded that the riots emerged because of the racism and economic inequality within U.S. society. It was the first official document relating to racial issues in the United States that stated that racism existed and was a major social and economic problem.

Commission, the social unrest of the late 1960s could be attributed to pervasive discrimination and segregation experienced by African Americans, the isolation of ghettos that destroyed hope and opportunity while enforcing failure, and the creation of a climate that encouraged violence.¹⁷ Although the social unrest in Houston did not match the intensity experienced in other cities, Board members believed it important to understand how the issues of racism and poverty had combined to create such tension.

Much of the Houston YWCA's understanding of deteriorating race relations within the city during the latter half of the 1960s was based upon the association's involvement in War on Poverty programs. In 1965, the Houston YWCA found itself immersed in the numerous anti-poverty programs. Unlike the 1930s, when the Houston association received federal monies to provide unemployment related programs for women, the War on Poverty programs brought federal monies to the association for work primarily targeted for African Americans and Mexican Americans. Instead of focusing on what the Board members might have considered middle-class women and helping them to maintain their status in the community, as it did in the 1930s, the YWCA during the 1960s took on a greater role with women in poverty-stricken areas around the city.¹⁸

¹⁷ See *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968).

¹⁸ See earlier discussion regarding class identification of YWCA participants in Chapter II.

One of the early instances of the Houston YWCA involving itself in local anti-poverty initiatives was when it joined the battle to reform the welfare system in Texas. National and local concerns over welfare had begun prior to the 1960s but came to a head during the decade. In an effort to facilitate the ongoing debate, the Houston YWCA agreed to co-sponsor a town hall meeting on “Financial Assistance for Employables in Need” held on December 4, 1958, in the Prudential Auditorium. The Board also helped with the publicity, in part because of the increasing number of calls received by the YWCA from local citizens inquiring about financial assistance. Board minutes note that the inquiry calls to the association had increased by sixteen percent over the previous year.¹⁹ Part of the reason for the increasing number of calls for financial assistance had to do with the lack of general aid programs in the state of Texas. It is unclear, though, as to why citizens during the late 1950s contacted the Houston YWCA for information on welfare programs.

The purpose of the 1958 town hall meeting on financial assistance to those in need was to urge the Harris County Commissioners Court to shoulder greater responsibility for human welfare, a responsibility that the local association argued was stipulated by law. Instead of relying on the services offered by organizations such as the YWCA and other social work organizations, the facilitators of the meeting believed that the Commissioners Court had to take some type of action without any further delay.

¹⁹ BOD minutes, November 25, 1958.

In addition to co-sponsoring the meeting, the local YWCA Board also designated one of its members to be in charge of expressing the association's concern regarding the welfare problem and requesting action from the Commissioner's Court at its next meeting.²⁰ In January of 1960, the Houston YWCA went on record as supporting legislation aimed at removing the "unemployability" clause from public welfare ordinances. Board members believed that the clause kept people who were in need of public welfare from receiving public assistance.

As was typical of the local association, Board members also chose to offer a forum to explore the different points of view regarding the distribution of welfare. The Board entitled the forum, "When is Federal Aid Acceptable?" This forum, as well as subsequent YWCA forums, often included high-ranking public officials. For example, W. P. Hobby, Jr., Bob Eckhardt, and T. Brooks Metcalfe actively participated. The YWCA Board viewed the forums as a way to provide information to local citizens regarding the welfare debate. To protect itself from the potential political fallout associated with that debate, the Board stressed that the forums were not to serve as propaganda in support of, or in opposition to, welfare reform.²¹ The public forums continued throughout the 1960s and

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ BOD minutes, January 1960.

included luncheon meetings with speakers from the Houston Community Council and the State Public Welfare Office.²²

By 1967, the YWCA had become more actively involved in the welfare debate. YWCA Board member Jean Childers became the secretary of the newly-developed Community Welfare Planning Association of Greater Houston (CWPAGH). Many in Houston considered the CWPAGH to be a new and dynamic organization that would focus on research and action in the realm of welfare provisions and welfare reform.²³ During 1968, the association conducted a study on welfare and financial assistance in Texas and the Houston YWCA believed the results to be of such importance that the Board asked the chairman of the study to speak in January 1969 at the annual Houston YWCA membership meeting. Thus the actions of the CWPAGH and the Houston YWCA became entwined through the involvement of Jean Childers.

In April 1969, the Houston YWCA Board discussed with its membership a proposed constitutional amendment raising the limit on public welfare. The idea of a ceiling on public assistance was one of the most hotly debated topics regarding public welfare. Texas was the only state at the time to have a constitutional limitation on public welfare, which in 1969 was set at \$60,000,000. A bill before the Texas legislature sought such a change, one that would raise welfare appropriations to \$80,000,000. YWCA Board members participated in a

²² BOD minutes, February 26, 1963.

²³ BOD minutes, February 28, 1967.

letter writing campaign to state legislators supporting the raising of the limit on welfare appropriations. Board minutes, however, indicate that members realized that such a bill would probably not pass the Texas Senate.²⁴

The Board's support regarding the raising of the constitutional limit on public assistance was based in part upon the association's work within the community during the 1960s and its own studies relating to public welfare. One such study indicated that a mother with four children residing in Houston had a minimal need of \$228 per month, yet the maximum allotment provided through public welfare was only \$114 per month.²⁵ Another women's organization in Houston, the League of Women Voters, joined with the YWCA in advocating an increase in the public welfare limit. In June 1969, the two groups cooperated in the sponsorship of a workshop on welfare entitled, "The Right to be Fed," and held it on June 5, 1969.²⁶

The participation by the Houston YWCA in welfare reform debates was partially fueled by its increased involvement in social work activities throughout the city. Working in a social work capacity brought the local association into

²⁴ BOD minutes, April, 1969.

²⁵ BOD minutes, May 27, 1969. The Council of Economic Advisors regarded a poor family of four as one with an annual income of less than \$3000 before taxes. Many believed this figure to be an inadequate figure when determining the number of families living in poverty. See Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, *War on Poverty* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994).

²⁶ Ibid.

contact with families not normally involved in YWCA activities. It also exposed the Houston YWCA to the depth of poverty in the city.

Again, the foundation for the association's transition to more of a social work agency began prior to the mid 1960s. The Houston Neighborhood Centers invited the Houston YWCA to take part in a training program for foreign social workers during the early 1960s. The Neighborhood Centers started a similar program during the late 1950s in Cleveland and the association wanted to extend the program to other cities, including Houston and Chicago.

The Cleveland Neighborhood Center initially approached the Houston YWCA to ask the association to participate in a training program for South American social workers. It requested that the Houston YWCA take one girl from Brazil and later take on as many as eight social workers from South America. Each of the girls was to train at the University of Houston for six weeks and work with an agency in the city from June until August. Each woman participating in the program was fluent in English and had been trained as a social worker in South America.

The purpose of the program was to help social workers in other countries raise their professional standards. It is unclear in the Board of Directors minutes as to what the problems were in other countries and how the social work programs in the United States would assist in solving the problems of South American urban areas. It is clear, though, that the Neighborhood Centers viewed the Houston YWCA as a social service agency.

The Houston YWCA agreed to participate in the program and offered the women lodging at the YWCA residence. The South American social service workers gained employment at the Magnolia Park Branch and the Peden Center as both branches had large numbers of Mexican-American participants. The social work program stipulated that each of the girls be supervised by someone with a graduate degree in social work. The Houston YWCA had four executives meeting that requirement. Foundation gifts provided the funding that allowed the Houston association to participate in the program without having to pay the women's stipends.²⁷

The collaboration with the Neighborhood Centers dovetailed into the work the YWCA had been doing during the early 1960s on the establishment of a school of social work in Houston. During the decade, the Executive Director of the Houston YWCA, Thelma Mills, and two Board members were part of a committee working toward bringing a school of social work to Houston. The committee quickly gained the support of the new dean of the School of Social Work at the University of Texas.

The Community Council contacted the Houston YWCA and asked that the association write letters supporting the establishment of a school of social work in Houston. Board members agreed to write letters in support of the school of social work. Recipients of those letters included Russell Long, Abraham Ribbicoff, and Wilbur Mills, as well as Senators John Tower and Ralph

²⁷ BOD minutes, February 27, 1962.

Yarborough, and several state representatives. At the same time that the YWCA was participating in the campaign for a school of social work in Houston, Congress began considering a bill in Washington that would provide money for educational purposes in the field of social work. If the bill passed, Houston was to be one of the first cities to benefit in the allocation of monies.²⁸

The Houston YWCA supported the request for a school of social work in the city in part because of its renewed involvement in efforts to eliminate problems associated with juvenile delinquency. As was the case in the 1920s, the YWCA found itself in the middle of another citywide study of juvenile delinquency during the 1960s. City officials again approached the organization for help with the problem. The Community Council of Harris County made a child welfare study and, when completed in January of 1962, issued the results of the study in a report entitled "These Are Your Children." The study pointed out what was being done to confront the juvenile delinquency problem and outlined steps needing to be taken to curb those problems.²⁹ In 1962, the Houston YWCA received a request from the University of Houston to study the issues and to suggest ways to curb juvenile delinquency.

The rapid growth of Houston and its subsequent lack of adequate recreational services made the local YWCA a logical choice to help with the growing problem. And much as it did during the 1920s, the association began

²⁸ BOD minutes, June 28, 1966.

²⁹ BOD minutes, February 27, 1962.

stressing the importance of day-camp type programs, particularly during the summer. Such programs would provide experiences for youth that would “insure their sound physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development and maturation.”³⁰ Day camp programs were in demand during the summer but the YWCA found that it was not able to respond to the pressing need for those camps, particularly for lower-income groups.³¹

The Houston YWCA also offered an increased number of educational programs aimed at teens. Since its inception, the association had provided such educational programs for women and girls, through both its own facilities and the local schools, but during the 1960s, the association increased its efforts. One such effort involved the Houston YWCA’s participation in programs designed to help increase literacy rates.

A study conducted by the association in 1965 led to the YWCA’s decision to involve itself in the literacy efforts of the city. The association’s study examined the city’s population growth, existing housing conditions, and available community facilities. The purpose of the study was to determine what role the YWCA was to play in social service programs in the city as well as to determine the course of action to be taken by the association during the following three years.

³⁰ BOD minutes, December 14, 1965.

³¹ Ibid.

The Board of Directors wanted the association to move toward greater participation in literacy efforts in Houston and work with other community agencies to combat illiteracy within the city.³² The YWCA report on services to the various communities in low-income areas of town included not only tutoring, but also day care services, after school and evening group activities for elementary and high school aged children, and basic education classes. In addition, the report also indicated a need for informal classes on health, family life, and household skills. The association saw evidence of a need for counseling services that included vocational, educational, employment, individual, and family counseling to complement the literacy programs.

To further the literacy efforts in the city, the Houston YWCA Board recommended in 1969 that the association develop and coordinate a training center for tutoring. Although the Board proposed to house the program at the Downtown branch, other YWCA branches became cooperating centers in order to extend the tutoring program into a greater number of neighborhoods. The plan included having a person from each of the branches on the Project Committee. Joining with the YWCA was the Harris County Community Action Association, and two other organizations to which workers affiliated with Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) were assigned.³³

³² BOD minutes, May 25, 1965.

³³ BOD minutes, October 24, 1967.

The YWCA's participation in the city's literacy efforts was only one small aspect of the association's overall social work program during the 1960s. The Houston YWCA gained much of its knowledge related to the needs of Houston's low-income citizens through its participation in such War on Poverty programs as Job Corps and Model Cities. The Job Corps originated as part of President Lyndon Johnson's anti-poverty plan. Many hailed the program as a way to help the poor elevate themselves out of poverty by training them for new job opportunities. Although it has been criticized for its high drop-out rate and the cost of the program, many people have praised the Job Corps as a program that instilled habits of industry, thrift, and reliability.³⁴ Job Corps programs and other juvenile delinquency action plans were directed at young people in the hopes of ending generational cycles of poverty. They were, in essence, "preventive."

For the Young Women's Christian Association, the preventive nature of such War on Poverty programs as Job Corps fit in well with the original focus of the association. The participation of the YWCA in War on Poverty programs seemed a natural fit. The federal government worked in concert with the YWCA during World War I, the Depression era, and World War II to staff residences, provide services to families, and to operate preventive programs aimed at controlling juvenile delinquency and promiscuous behavior by women during wartime. The association's stance on racial integration made it even more appealing as an agent in the war on poverty.

³⁴ James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty, 1900–1914*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 129.

The Houston YWCA became involved with Job Corps in November of 1966, when the Women in Community Service (WICS) approached the association and asked them to provide residence facilities for girls recruited for Job Corps.³⁵ Initially, WICS anticipated that the number of girls staying at the YWCA residence would be small. There were only three girls sent to the local association from WICS during the month of November. The federal government paid the Houston YWCA the full rate of \$4.00 per night to house the girls. The relationship between WICS and Job Corps continued to grow, and by November of 1967, the Houston YWCA was housing up to thirty Job Corps girls at the residence.

The increase in the number of girls being housed at the YWCA residence during 1967 was tied to the participation of the local association in a Job Corps Extension Residence Program. The regional YWCA office in Atlanta, Georgia, contacted the Houston YWCA and asked if Houston would participate in the Job Corps residence program. The Extension Residence program provided for girls who had completed their work with Job Corps and were ready to locate jobs in the city. The girls needed a job and a place to live in their new setting.

³⁵ Women in Community Service, Inc. was a coalition established by Church Women United, the National Council of Catholic Women, the National Council of Jewish Women, the National Council of Negro Women and was later joined by the American GI Forum Women. The goal of the organization was to help break down walls of prejudice, intolerance, and discrimination. Josephine Weiner, "The Story of WICS."

The federal government paid the YWCA the full cost of the residence and also approved of paying a salary for a counselor to be responsible for employment, personal, and behavioral counseling. The National Board of the YWCA signed a contract with Job Corps for the Extension project and subcontracted to Houston for a unit of twenty girls and one counselor. The local association received a letter from the state Office of Economic Opportunity (O.E.O.) in which Governor John Connally expressed his pleasure that the Houston YWCA had joined the project. Other centers participating in the project were located in New Orleans and Oklahoma City.³⁶

The girls participating in the project were between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one years of age and had completed their Job Corps training as secretaries, hair dressers, or other professions. Many of the Job Corps graduates assigned to Houston were high school dropouts and were from small communities.³⁷ Although Job Corps tended to have a large number of African-American participants, there is no indication in the Board minutes that the Job Corps women living at the YWCA residence were non-white.³⁸ The Houston YWCA housed the girls in the association's residence and had them interspersed among the other residents so as to not draw attention to them as being part of

³⁶ BOD minutes, April 18, 1967.

³⁷ BOD minutes, May 23, 1967.

³⁸ By the time the Houston YWCA began participating in the Job Corps Residence Extension program, it had opened its residence to African-American women. The integration of the residence occurred in 1961.

the Job Corps program. In June 1967, the first participant in the Job Corps – YWCA (JCYW) program arrived.

The YWCA staff working with the Job Corps Extension program appeared before the Board of Directors in February of 1968 to report on the status of the JCYW program. In particular, staff members reported on girls who had participated in the Job Corps program, had left Houston to find work, and had returned to Houston. The YWCA found that many of the girls had not found work and were often bitter and disappointed.³⁹

Even though the Job Corps returnees appeared disillusioned by their participation in the program, the Board minutes do not indicate an understanding of the disillusionment of the Job Corps participants. Instead the YWCA Public Affairs Committee and the Board of Directors wanted to contact members of the legislature to inform them of the successes of the Job Corps program. The Board minutes do not elaborate on any of the successes. Perhaps the successes were more in the area of personal appearance and conformity as there are numerous references in the minutes to the YWCA staff members being asked to speak with the JCYW participants about proper clothing and manners.⁴⁰

³⁹ BOD minutes, February 27, 1968.

⁴⁰ Perhaps the response of the Board to the disillusionment of Job Corps members was in part a failure to understand the full effects of racism and discrimination inherent in society. It is interesting to note, though, that at the same time that the Job Corps participants were becoming disillusioned with the program, the Kerner Commission was studying the cause of social unrest within the country.

The Job Corps–YWCA contract with the National Board was scheduled to expire in June of 1969 but the Houston YWCA noted that Congress had approved a continuation of the program for another year. The local association agreed to house eighteen to twenty girls from 1969 through 1970 even though the previous year the number of girls in the residence had grown to twenty-seven. Although the number of girls continued to increase, the local association feared losing funding for the program after the extension year. In December of 1968, the Board minutes noted their concerns as they pointed out that President Richard Nixon did not support the Job Corps program and did not want to see it continued.⁴¹

At the same time that the Houston YWCA was participating with the Job Corps program, the association also took an active role in the Houston Action for Youth program (HAY). Houston Action for Youth approached the YWCA in February 1965 and asked it to assist with the organization in work training programs. HAY had been operating in what the local YWCA referred to as the Northside Target Area since July 1, 1964. When the local YWCA approached the local groups concerning participation in HAY programs, the Community Council and the United Fund encouraged it to submit a supplemental budget to cover expenses for the 1965 fiscal year. Although it could not guarantee funding,

⁴¹ BOD minutes, December 17, 1968.

the United Fund did agree to review the supplemental budget and give it stronger consideration for the 1966 fiscal year.⁴²

In addition, the Houston YWCA provided one skilled staff member to work with HAY to initiate plans for daycare services for the McGowen Street and Magnolia Park areas, two areas that had a primarily African-American and Hispanic population. The YWCA also cooperated with Houston Independent School District to locate a site for basic education classes in the Magnolia Park area.⁴³

HAY leaders also requested that the Houston YWCA consider providing counseling services for troubled youth. An outgrowth of the request by HAY was a proposal by both organizations for the establishment of extension courses from the University of Texas School of Social Work that would provide training for HAY staff trainees and YWCA staff members. The proposal included a provision to grant graduate credit toward a Master's of Social Work degree for those participating in the program.⁴⁴

The YWCA approached the Houston Community Council in 1966 to ask for funding for four programs that it was interested in presenting to the community. The proposal included the counseling of troubled youth (with HAY), the operation of day care programs that utilized the facilities of Magnolia Park

⁴² BOD minutes, February 23, 1965.

⁴³ BOD minutes, December 14, 1965.

⁴⁴ BOD minutes, January 25, 1966.

and Blue Triangle branches, and a university project in affiliation with the National Student Program. Although the Houston Community Council questioned the need for a YWCA counseling center, the counseling program, in conjunction with HAY received funding from the Hogg foundation in June 1966.

The Houston YWCA's willingness to cooperate with HAY in so many social service areas may possibly be tied to the close relationship the YWCA had with the Houston Action for Youth director. A former YWCA employee, Annabelle Sawyer, became the first director of the Houston Action for Youth organization. Sawyer made a presentation before the Board of Directors regarding the objectives of the HAY program. According to Sawyer, HAY was to help people help themselves. The organization initially planned to develop nine walk-in centers that would provide services to those who need them--and in their own neighborhoods. Centers operated initially in Kelley Village, the West End, and Ryan Center. HAY planned to offer activities for young children, teenagers, and mothers. According to YWCA Board minutes, a special note was made regarding the work that "Latins, Anglos, and Negroes" were doing together as part of HAY.⁴⁵

During 1965, the Houston YWCA participated in the organization of an additional work-training program to teach young people clerical, mechanical,

⁴⁵ It is interesting to note that the Houston Action for Youth had as its first director a long-time employee of the Houston YWCA. By 1967, Mayor Louie Welch viewed the HAY program as one that trained militant revolutionaries. A group of HAY workers entered Welch's office and threatened to cause a riot unless the African-American community gained control of the War on Poverty programs. See Clayson, p. 221.

homemaker-nurse, and food service jobs. The association called its work-training program "Job Opportunity for Youth" (JOY). The JOY program began in January of 1966 and initially called for the training of fourteen youth in various full-time jobs.⁴⁶

By early 1968, the Houston YWCA had decided that it needed to study its programs to determine the trends in social services, human needs, and social issues in the city.⁴⁷ Results of the study painted a very vivid picture of a city in transition. Houston was the fastest growing city in the United States at that time. It was also a potential hot-bed of race-related activity as was evidenced by the Texas Southern University riot. Local citizens were quickly becoming disenchanted with War on Poverty programs. In such an environment, the Houston YWCA had to determine if its programs were meeting the needs of local citizens.

Based upon the study, Board members concluded that Houston had three distinct cultures and a great deal of both wealth and poverty. It was also a center of education. Board members concluded that many of the problems were geographic in nature, meaning that the expansion of the city limits contributed to many of the problems plaguing Houston. Most notable to the Board was the problem of isolation caused, in part, by the construction of freeways that cut

⁴⁶ BOD minutes, November 23, 1965.

⁴⁷ BOD minutes, January 23, 1968.

through neighborhoods and divided areas.⁴⁸ Houston had a very poor public transportation system, and many of Houston's financially poor citizens did not have automobiles. Such an isolation problem led the local association to determine in March 1968 to focus on ways to diminish the isolation through a greater utilization of its branches.

The Board requested that each of the YWCA branches design programs to address social isolation problems. The Blue Triangle Branch initiated such activities as literacy projects, tutoring, preschool enrichment, and neighborhood development projects. The Magnolia Park Branch developed similar programs and included classes to teach English to non-native speakers. The Magnolia Park director informed the Board that priorities for work with the Mexican-American population included moving past the language barrier and establishing a health program within the community.⁴⁹

Two of the newer branches, Peden Branch and Spring Branch, experienced additional problems associated with the rapid development of Houston. One of the problems revolved around how to best serve a very

⁴⁸ The idea of social isolation breeding greater problems associated with racism and poverty was part of the Kerner Report. Senator Hubert Humphrey also noted that "metropolitan areas that [were] essentially black centers ringed by the wealthier whites [could not] be permitted to crystallize and solidify." See Humphrey, p. 53.

⁴⁹ Even though there was discontent among the Mexican-American population regarding the distribution of War on Poverty funds, there is no indication in the YWCA minutes that the association recognized a disproportionate amount of funds going to the African-American community and few being allotted for the Mexican-American community.

economically and racially diverse population. Each of the branches included numerous programs for youth and aimed at facilitating racial integration. The Spring Branch YWCA served the Carverdale area of Houston that had the distinction of being the “lowest Negro economic area in the city.”⁵⁰ Board minutes point out that the railroad tracks literally created a dividing line between the Carverdale area and the more affluent region served by the Spring Branch YWCA.

The programs promoted by the Spring Branch YWCA in the Carverdale area included working with the Blue Triangle Branch and Houston Family Services to help improve the self-image of African-American teenage girls. The YWCA’s involvement in the area came about as a result of the local association’s recent survey on the lack of services to low-income areas in Houston and the encouragement of the Community Welfare Planning Association (CWPA). A report of a study of the Memorial area conducted by the CWPA indicated a lack of services for teens and it determined that the YWCA was in the best position to develop programs that would appeal to that age group.

The Houston YWCA, in cooperation with churches and other organizations, began summer teen discussion groups that included such topics as drugs and sexual values. The YWCA also extended invitations to teenage

⁵⁰ BOD minutes, March 26, 1968.

boys in the area.⁵¹ In addition to the programs for teens, the local association partnered with the state Department of Public Welfare and Neighborhood Centers--Day Care Association in offering services to pre-school aged children and pre-teens.

The Carverdale project was one of two YWCA projects targeting youth in poverty-stricken areas. The other was the Crockett Street Center. The Crockett Street Project was located in a racially and culturally diverse area, the First and Sixth wards, northwest of and adjacent to downtown Houston. Median family income in that particular area was \$300 per month and the median grade level of education was 7.6 years. Severely limited community facilities existed in the part of town serviced by the Crockett Street Center. The neighborhood had below average conditions in the elementary and junior high schools and no high school. It also did not have any study facilities for after school and no library. As for public facilities, it had no city parks, no parentally approved indoor recreation space for teenagers, especially teenage girls, and no public health facilities. The street conditions were poor and bus transportation was expensive and inconvenient.

The Houston YWCA established its Crockett Street Center in 1968 as a student summer work project. It continued the project with funding from the United Fund and other organizations such as the Junior League. Activities at the Crockett Street Center included a pre-school, homework sessions for school-

⁵¹ Ibid.

aged children, homemaking classes, arts and crafts, health and sex education, and a women's buying co-op.

In an effort to increase funding for the Crockett Street Center, the YWCA petitioned to have the center included as a part of Model Cities which had begun in Houston in 1969. The Crockett Street center became part of Model Cities but within a short period of time, the YWCA began having difficulty receiving federal monies, thus making it difficult to continue services. The Executive Committee of the YWCA Board of Directors determined the program at Crockett Street to be vital enough to the community that it would continue to provide services with or without Model Cities money.

In February of 1970, the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors authorized an appeal to the United Fund for additional monies for the Crockett Street program. The additional allocation of \$19,996 was the amount of money needed by the association to balance the budget for the program. It was difficult for the Houston YWCA to appeal for additional funding from the United Way because the program had not been reviewed by the United Fund. In an effort to counter the lack of review, the Houston YWCA developed a visual aid to present to the Budget Panel.⁵² Although it received the financial assistance from the United Fund, the YWCA could not count on continued monies for an expansion of its Crockett Street programs.

⁵² BOD minutes, February 24, 1971.

In March 1971, participation in the Crockett Street programs totaled 1,212 persons for the month. A month later, participation increased to 1,495. The Houston Board sent a representative from the YWCA to a meeting of the Model Cities Commission in May 1971 to determine the reason for the continued delay in monies. One of the YWCA Board members appearing before the Model Cities Commission reported back that "she, in behalf of Crockett Street and the YWCA, had said in the meeting that they [the Model Cities Commission] were writing out all the Blacks and Browns in Area 4."⁵³ Her comment to the Commission led to a request that she leave the meeting.

Nevertheless, the Model Cities program agreed to fund the Crockett Street Center. It provided money for a full-time staff member, a support program, supplies, travel mileage, and some of the occupancy costs incurred by the Houston YWCA.⁵⁴ Even though Model Cities funds were available to support Crockett Street programs through February of 1972, the Board sought ways to secure additional funding from sources other than Model Cities. The Board, however, was constrained by a moratorium on all independent action other than those in consultation with the United Fund. The problem restricted the organization from approaching other church and civic groups for funds.⁵⁵

⁵³ BOD minutes, May 25, 1971.

⁵⁴ BOD minutes, January 25, 1972.

⁵⁵ BOD minutes, January 25, 1972.

The association eventually received funding for the Crockett Street program through 1973 but the financial crisis brought on by the support of Crockett Street plagued the association during the early and mid 1970s.⁵⁶ The Crockett Street project was a prime example of what happened to the association when federal monies did not arrive in time or were inadequate to continue providing a high level of service to families in the area.

The Board of Directors considered a proposal to participate in an inter-agency comprehensive service for families with children with the Department of Public Welfare. The program provided mandated comprehensive services to families with children based upon requirements included in the Social Security Act amendments of 1968. Funds made available under Title IV A of the Social Security Act were to be matched by the United Fund.

The Neighborhood Centers Association, to which the YWCA had a previous working relationship, would supply the services in designated geographic areas of Houston and would "purchase" the delivery of those services from participating agencies, including the Houston YWCA. The services to be provided included educational programs, homemaking, citizenship, child development, as well as such services as family planning, help to unmarried parents, and employment readiness. The Blue Triangle Branch, Mid-City Center,

⁵⁶ BOD minutes, June 22, 1971.

and the Magnolia Park Branch were located in the geographic area targeted by the program.⁵⁷

By June of 1970, both the Magnolia Park Branch and the Blue Triangle Branch had begun offering programs supported by the Title IV funds. Both branches offered after-school enrichment programs for school children and provided bus transportation to the facilities. Magnolia Park also offered intermediate and advanced English and citizenship classes, a Ladies Day Out program and a boys program that included boxing and basketball. Additional classes were offered in cooking and crafts and in the afternoons there were dialogues with pre-teens.⁵⁸

Exposure to the numerous problems associated with poverty and racism in Houston during the late 1960s and early 1970s caused the Houston YWCA to attempt to provide a center to address social justice issues. At the same time that the Houston YWCA was battling Model Cities for funding of its Crockett Street Center, the association began planning for the development of a Social Justice Institute. Much of the impetus for the development of such an institute originated with the national YWCA office. The Houston YWCA also pointed to the social unrest in the city as an indicator of problems that could be addressed by the institute. The local association held the first meeting of the Institute in February of 1970. It stated that the purpose for the Social Justice Institute was to

⁵⁷ BOD minutes, February 24, 1970.

⁵⁸ BOD minutes, June 2, 1970.

“explore the depth and scope of the problems of the powerless people in this city and to find ways which our organization, individuals and other groups can work at the ‘grass roots’ level to enable the powerless to achieve empowerment.”⁵⁹

By March of 1970, the YWCA had 187 persons registered for the Institute with the focus being education and “action oriented in its results.” A task force developed to provide direction for the Institute presented its recommendations to the Board of Directors. The recommendations included having the YWCA consult with other agencies to follow up on the YWCA–HCCAA Services to Troubled Youth study. Also included was a recommendation that the Board prepare a statement on YWCA employment practices. The questions Board members asked concerned the YWCA’s vendors and whether or not such companies were equal opportunity employers. They also asked if the bank used by the association welcomed business from minority groups, if the bank employed minorities, and if the YWCA’s insurance firm accepted accounts with minority members.⁶⁰

As the records indicate, the Houston YWCA expanded its programs dramatically during the decade of the 1960s and the early 1970s. Although still addressing racial discrimination, Board members determined that there was a great demand for YWCA services as a social work organization. The federal government also offered monies to those associations that offered activities

⁵⁹ BOD minutes, January 27, 1970.

⁶⁰ BOD Minutes, Mary 19, 1970.

through War on Poverty programs. During a decade when the Houston YWCA suffered funding problems, the monies associated with Model Cities and Job Corps appealed to the local Board.

The records also indicate that throughout the decade, the Houston YWCA stretched itself very thin, both in personnel and finances. Branch activities increased at Blue Triangle, Magnolia Park, Spring Branch, and Peden. The local association's cooperation with outside organizations, such as HAY, the Neighborhood Centers, the Community Welfare Planning Association, and the Houston Council on Human Relations increased dramatically and brought the YWCA into contact with women who were not served by traditional YWCA programs.

By looking at the Houston YWCA's participation in the various War on Poverty initiatives, one can begin to glimpse the priorities of a women's organization in a growing city. Although the Board minutes and additional records of the Houston YWCA do not elaborate on the successes and failures of each project, the records provide some insight into the problems facing the city and how a women's organization believed it could help. Projects such as tutoring, the operation of day care centers, and holding educational forums to explore the major social problems of the day were adaptations of programs the association had been offering in Houston since its founding in 1907.

What remains apparent is the increased awareness by the local association of problems of racism and poverty. Prior to the 1960s, the Houston

Board dealt with the issue of racism on a more abstract level. Even during the controversy surrounding the integration of the YWCA cafeteria, the Board still struggled with a full understanding of the impact of racism on people of color. After its participation in War on Poverty programs, the local Board began making connections with the problems faced by people of color and the growing social unrest illustrated by the race riots of the late 1960s.

As it moved from the late 1960s and into the 1970s, the association had to become more aware of how the issue of sexism played into the problems faced by women of color and the increasing poverty of women and children. As many historians have noted, the African-American civil rights movement triggered a civil rights revolution where numerous minority groups clamored for recognition. Although the Board minutes of the local YWCA throughout the 1950s and 1960s elaborate on the numerous social ills associated with racism, the minutes only infrequently mentioned the concerns of women rising to the surface during the last half of the 1960s and the early 1970s. The strengthening of the women's movement after the formation of the National Organization for Women in 1966 brought those issues to the forefront and caused the local YWCA Board to listen to the voices of women of color.

CHAPTER VI

THE CHALLENGE OF RELEASING “WOMEN POWER”

Houston YWCA Board of Directors' minutes during 1969 include a reference to the “challenge of releasing women power.”¹ Considering the times and the reemergence of the feminist movement during the latter half of the decade, the terminology is not surprising. The rhetoric of the 1960s included such terms as “black power” and “brown power,” and the civil rights revolution was in full swing by the late 1960s and early 1970s. Media attention surrounding the advances of the African-American civil rights movement empowered other groups to seek protections for their civil rights as well.

What was interesting, though, was how the local YWCA Board members struggled to define “women power.” What did “women power” mean? How could the local association go about releasing “women power?” Was “women power” the same as a women’s movement? The answer to those questions seemed to elude the Board. Even though during the 1970s the Houston YWCA found itself very much in the middle of the women’s movement with the local association’s hosting of the 1970 National YWCA Conference, the first national Chicana conference in 1971, and participation in the International Women’s Year Conference in 1977, members could only define the association’s goal in

¹ BOD minutes, March 14, 1969. Although the more familiar term might be “woman power,” the Houston Board members use the term “women power.” Perhaps it was their way of denoting that they were referring to the power of women as a group.

releasing women power as “one that focused on the needs of girls, women, youth, and families.”²

In addition to the reference to releasing women power, the local Board of Directors examined an Association Review Report that asserted that the maintenance of the Houston YWCA as an “autonomous woman’s movement” had been a continual challenge. According to Board members, “overt and subtle attacks” had been levied by some in leadership positions with the United Fund in an attempt to facilitate a merger between the YWCA and the YMCA that many thought would solve many of the United Fund’s problems.³ Minutes from the March 1969 meeting did not elaborate on what type of problems the merger would solve.

The Houston YWCA, though, opposed the merger of the two organizations and felt it imperative to defend its position within the community. But what did the association mean when it said it was an “autonomous woman’s movement”? By asserting that the YWCA was a woman’s movement, did it mean that it was an essential part of the feminist movement? The minutes reflect difficulty on the part of Board members in determining how the local association was to proceed in the face of uncertain times. The Houston Board believed that it needed clarification from the National Board regarding the essential nature of a woman’s

² BOD minutes, March 1969.

³ Ibid.

movement and what its relevancy and contributions might be in the last three decades of the twentieth century.⁴

According to women who had participated in the YWCA from its inception, the association had always been a women's organization. But was it a women's movement? The YWCAs of the late 1800s endeavored to provide safe, affordable housing for young women who had relocated to cities to seek employment. They also offered services such as Travelers' Aid, employment bureaus, cafeterias, and physical training programs designed to appeal to the young, single woman who needed to find employment outside of the home yet maintain her status within the community. They provided programs for a segment of the population that had few others offering aid and assistance.

And during the early twentieth century, the national YWCA supported the extension of voting rights to women as well as protective legislation for women workers, yet opposed the Equal Rights Amendment of the 1920s. It in some ways distanced itself from the more radical women's movement of the 1920s. As the country faced the devastating effects of an economic depression during the 1930s, local YWCAs attempted to protect women being adversely affected through the loss of employment. The YWCA was one of the few organizations actively looking out for the welfare of single women during the depression.

As the association moved through the decades of the 1940s and 1950s, the most pressing issue facing a local YWCA seemed to be how to educate itself

⁴ "Association Review Report," presented at the Board of Directors' meeting, March 1969.

on the inequities associated with racism, both within the association and the community at large. African-American women members of the local branches began voicing their displeasure over the apparent hypocrisy of advocating an end to racial discrimination while maintaining racially segregated branches. Women of color had a voice and began using it to express the belief that their needs as women of color were often different from the middle- or upper-class white women sitting on the Board of Directors.

But as the civil rights movement gained momentum during the 1950s, the National Board of the YWCA had to come to terms with the realization that the combined obstacle of race and class made it very difficult to advocate policies designed to aid all women. Although the National Board had continuously issued directives to local associations aimed at eliminating racism within the organization, little was mentioned as to how women in the various ethnic groups experienced racism. As the women's movement began to develop as an outgrowth of the African-American civil rights movement, the YWCA had to respond and determine how it would address the growing demands of minority women.

The national YWCA's close ties with the African-American civil rights movement meant that the organizational leaders had contact with women outside of the YWCA including active participants in various civil rights groups. Women's participation in such organizations as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) began

increasing during the 1960s, and they began to chafe at what they perceived as overt sexism within the civil rights movement. Historian Sara Evans noted that the civil rights movement became more alienating and sexually exploitative for women. According to Evans, women understood that they could not make the same mistakes as African Americans and rely on others to define the issues, methods, and goals of a burgeoning women's movement.⁵ A realization that women had something to offer led many to determine that they shared a commonality with minorities striving for an expansion of their civil rights. Therefore, the 1960s not only brought about a growing sense of awareness among minority groups, but it also signaled a strengthening of the women's movement.

The founding of the National Organization for Women in 1966 propelled the women's movement to the forefront among other civil rights groups. Issues regarding feminism, equal pay for equal work, abortion, and how to best address the needs of women and girls became a central focus of the movement. But just as had occurred during the 1920s, women found themselves divided regarding what women truly wanted and needed. Were the needs of married women the same as single women? Were the needs of middle- and upper-class women the same as women living in poverty? And were the needs of African-American women different from those of white women? Were the needs of Chicana

⁵ Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

women different from both white women and African-American women? The issue of race made it somewhat difficult to discern a distinct women's voice.

Directives from the National Board of the YWCA did not make things clearer for local associations. Southern associations, in particular, often failed to grasp the dynamics associated with racial segregation and discrimination. It often took the prodding, cajoling, and insistence on the part of African-American women before southern YWCAs began embracing fully the need to confront racism in all facets of life. And as difficult as it was for southern YWCAs to embrace the inclusive policies of the National Board, how would they now embrace efforts designed to minimize and possible eliminate gender discrimination?

For members of the Houston YWCA Board of Directors, the era of the late 1950s and early 1960s marked a watershed period as they found themselves increasingly exposed to a more diverse group of women. African-American women associated with the Blue Triangle Branch became more vocal in their demands upon the Houston YWCA Board. The Mexican-American women associated with the Magnolia Park Branch included demands for English classes and childcare. And the exposure to women living in abject poverty through the War on Poverty programs helped propel the local YWCA into a position of welfare advocate that began refocusing the organization on the wants and needs of women.

The Houston YWCA, therefore, had to begin reorienting itself in order to release women power. First, it had to examine the strengths and weaknesses of women within the community. It then had to determine how to best assist women in their quest to expand both their rights and their opportunities in a changing world. In order to do that, the Houston YWCA had to consider both single women and married women. And lastly, the local association had to embrace the needs of women of color. In doing so, members of the Houston YWCA Board of Directors found themselves participating in the first national Chicana conference in the United States.

Throughout its history, the Houston YWCA had encouraged women to look beyond the association for ways to bring the ideals of the Young Women's Christian Association into the local community. Such encouragement was particularly evident in the 1940s as the Houston association began exploring the detrimental effects of racism on the community and offering workshops and classes on breaking down barriers between the races. But during the late 1950s, the Houston YWCA began stressing the importance of building upon women's strengths and utilizing women's talents in more varied ways within the community.

As late as 1960, the Houston YWCA Board of Directors still appealed to the community from the standpoint that the YWCA offered women an opportunity to aid in the growth of the city. In a document entitled "For the Hearts and Minds of Its People: Announcing the Plans of the Young Women's Christian

Association for Greater Service to the People of Houston and Harris County” was a section establishing the importance of women to the community. It stated, “But today the women of Houston and Harris County also have a special and enduring responsibility, invisible but no less real—to mould, [sic] from their central position in every home, the spirit which lies in the hearts and minds of this great community’s people.” The tone of the document sounded very much in line with the thinking of the early founders of the local association. The woman would lead from her position within the family structure.

Concurring with the introductory statement was a letter from J. A. Elkins, the Honorary Chairman of the Houston YWCA’s Expansion Fund and Senior Chairman of the Board for First City National Bank of Houston. Elkins concluded his letter supporting the three million dollar campaign drive of the YWCA by saying that “The men of Houston are known throughout the nation for their accomplishments. We will make sure our women have the physical means of providing programs . . . for all segments of our population.” He went on to say that “Physical and economic growth are hollow victories without the social stability so uniquely provided by our women.”⁶

For the Triennium 1965–1968, as the women’s movement began to gain in numbers throughout the country, the Houston YWCA prepared its program

⁶ “For the Hearts and Minds of Its People: Announcing the Plans of the Young Women’s Christian Association for Greater Service to the People of Houston and Harris County. A Confidential Prospectus to Members of the YWCA Family and a Few of Houston’s Leading Citizens.” Found in the Houston YWCA Collection, HMRC.

recommendations. The Board broke down the major priorities into education, employment, leisure, and social isolation. As part of its emphasis on education, Board members and staff personnel agreed that the YWCA's educational program had to focus not only on those segments of the population that were economically deprived but also on preparing girls so that they could "best perform the multiple roles they may carry concurrently or successively as worker, wife, mother, citizen, and community leader." The recommendations also elaborated on the need to work toward opening employment opportunities in all fields for girls so that they could find gainful employment and make "a creative contribution to the community."⁷

Although the document was aimed at gaining community support for a significant building campaign for the Houston YWCA, the first such campaign since the 1920s, the appeal by the Board appeared very similar to the appeal almost forty years prior. The YWCA goals enumerated in the document pointed out how the women of the YWCA could help "to build a fellowship of women and girls." The seven specific goals included:

- I. Helping Youth Toward Faith,
- II. Making Better Communities,
- III. Improving Democracy,
- IV. Building Happier Homes,
- V. Building a Sense of Belonging,

⁷ "City-Wide Program Development Committee Recommendations for the Triennium 1965–68," Houston YWCA Collection, HMRC.

- VI. Helping Individuals to Become More Secure,
- VII. Striving for a More Understanding and Peaceful World,

Many of the suggested programs echoed programs that the Houston YWCA had offered since its early days in the city. Examples given in the prospectus included how the Magnolia Park Branch helped natives of such countries as Cuba, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic meet naturalization requirements. It also offered citizenship classes, instructions regarding the operation of voting machines, the art of public speaking, and English language classes. One program was entitled "Meal Planning and Marketing for Oriental Wives."⁸

The YWCA needed to remain a viable and relevant organization throughout the 1970s. The term "liberation," as presented in the *YWCA Magazine*, included the increasing availability of educational and employment activities for women. These opportunities were necessary "for women bound by the shackles of mediocrity, discrimination and with no clout because they feel less than human beings," to break free of barriers and aim to achieve higher goals.⁹ Liberation included the liberation of women, both white women and women of color.

In an attempt to propel Houston women into more active roles at the civic level, the Executive Director of the association, Thelma Mills, contacted noted

⁸ "For the Hearts and Minds of its Peoples," p. 11, YWCA Collection, HMRC.

⁹ *YWCA Magazine*, June 1970, p. 5.

lawyer, businesswoman, and journalist Margaret Hickey and inquired about the hosting of a workshop focusing on the place of women within the community. Hickey had a particular interest in the economic and social problems of women. In 1931, she had organized a class for the YWCA that helped to retrain unemployed women and ran the program until the federal government took it over in 1933. She had been an advocate of equal rights for women and had a long history with the YWCA in St. Louis, Missouri.¹⁰

In a letter to Hickey, Mills expressed her concerns regarding the place of women in Houston. She described women's status in Houston as "so much waste of ability and manpower potential." She explained to Hickey that few women served on official boards of Houston churches, had few places on Community Council Boards, and only served in clerical capacities for the United Fund. Mills elaborated even further by saying that she believed that women themselves were not even conscious that they were so little appreciated within the community. Hickey responded to Mills by saying that she was excited about the workshop idea in Houston and stressed her support for the role the YWCA assumed in "sustaining and nourishing the leadership of women."¹¹

¹⁰ The letter from Thelma Mills to Margaret Hickey is dated July 25, 1958 and is part of the Houston YWCA Collection at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center. Margaret Hickey's papers are housed at the Western Historical Manuscript Collection at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. Hickey also served on the Advisory Committee on Women's Affairs of the Federal Civil Defense Administration, President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women, and participated in the White House Conference on Equal Employment Opportunities in 1965.

Surely Houston was not the only city where women found themselves only minimally represented on local boards and within the numerous civic organizations. The decade of the 1950s fostered a call for a more domestic role for women. But the YWCA continued to offer leadership opportunities to women.

As the association moved into the 1960s, nourishing the leadership role of women seemed to be a major concern of the YWCA on the national level. At the same time, pressure began to mount from various agencies, such as the United Fund, for the YWCA and the YMCA to merge as they offered many of the same services and activities. In an effort to justify its claims that the YWCA should maintain its independence from the YMCA, the National Board commissioned a study of YWCA programs and their benefits to women. The National Board published the results of the study as the Dodson Report.

In 1961, the Houston YWCA began studying workbooks provided by the National Board concerning the Dodson Report. The report had been funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and among other things studied the relationship between the YWCA and the YMCA. The impetus for the study actually originated earlier with the 1958 convention when delegates to the national convention had recommended that the National Board explore various types of cooperation between the YWCA and similar agencies.

One of the Houston Board members who attended the national convention presented highlights of the Dodson Report to the Houston Board of Directors.

¹¹ Ibid.

The report discussed the role of the YWCA for the next ten years and stated that the association should not lose its own identity. It also stressed that the programs of the YWCA should not overlap programs being offered by other agencies. The report also suggested to the YWCA that it guard against over-expansion, which might lead to mediocrity of service, the impulse to stifle the voice of the YWCA particularly on issues of great public concern, and mergers or arrangements that would limit the aspects of the program. To go even further, it suggested that the YWCA cooperate with agencies that had a similarity of purpose, involve women in situations that build upon their role as female human beings, and involve itself with organizations and groups as peers.¹²

The Houston YWCA took those recommendations to heart, and the programs offered by the local association through the 1960s show a real concern for maintaining autonomy of program. The Houston YWCA for years had aligned itself with other civic organizations led by, or made up primarily of, women, including the League of Women Voters and numerous church organizations. In addition, it had many times been one of the few voices advocating protections for women in the workplace. The association's business and professional women's clubs during the first half of the decade stressed increased training for women workers and increasing women's pay. They often led the way in efforts to improve race relations and to provide better working conditions for Houston women.

¹² BOD minutes, March 28, 1961.

For several years during the 1940s and 1950s, the United Fund and other agencies tried to suggest that the YMCA and the YWCA should merge. The YWCA resisted all attempts at a merger, stating on numerous occasions that the YWCA was a women's movement and had the needs of women as its primary focus. Although it may have offered programs that it extended to women, the YMCA was not a women's organization.¹³

The results of the Dodson Report, combined with the emergence of the women's movement in the 1960s, encouraged the Houston YWCA and other women's groups to advocate a greater voice for women in the city and the state. Just as it had when confronting problems associated with racism, the association turned to seminars and workshops to discuss women's rights. On April 28, 1966, the Houston YWCA, in cooperation with the University of Houston and the Women's Bureau sponsored a seminar entitled, "Women's Challenge – Partners in Progress."

The purpose of the seminar was to encourage state legislators to create a Commission on Women. Texas was one of only four states at that time that did not have a Commission on Women. The seminar included a guest speaker,

¹³ Josie Vandenberg-Davis, "The Manly Pursuit of a Partnership between the Sexes: The Debate over YMCA programs for Women and Girls, 1914–1933," *Journal of American History* 78(March 1992), p. 1338. Vandenberg-Davis noted that the YWCA claimed its identity as a women's organization for women. The YMCA's interest in offering programs for women threatened the YWCA's "organizational autonomy and commitment to womanly solidarity across lines of class and race." A 1930 study regarding cooperation between the YMCA and YWCA showed that the YMCA's venture into women's programs worked to the detriment of the YWCA.

Fannie Boyls of San Antonio, who was a trial examiner for the National Labor Relations Board in Washington. President Lyndon Johnson in 1966 named Boyls as one of the Six Outstanding Women in Government. Additional panel members for the seminar included seven women who represented the fields of medicine, law, banking, women in the space age, and “the total woman.” The Houston YWCA also invited the presidents of all major women’s organizations in the city to the seminar held at the University of Houston. The local association expected 160 attendees and hoped that the publicity generated by the seminar would garner recognition from the governor of the state of Texas.

Although they do not elaborate on the success or failure of the seminar, the Board minutes point out that in June of the same year, Governor John Connally finally considered appointing a Commission on the Status of Women in Texas. Rhobia Taylor of the U.S. Department of Labor’s Women’s Bureau in the Southwest, a former speaker at the Houston YWCA’s “Gateways to New Careers” seminar, contacted the association to inform the Board of an article running in the Dallas newspaper concerning the Commission on the Status of Women. Taylor encouraged Houston Board members to contact Governor Connally and commend him for considering the formation of a Commission. Board members believed it important to go one step further. They also believed they should suggest that a committee be formed so that Texas would have representation at a conference in Washington, D.C., during that same year on the Status of Women. Governor Connally replied to the association to let them

know that he would appoint two women representatives to the conference even though he had not yet appointed the commission.

At the same time that the Houston YWCA participated in activities designed to convince Governor Connally to establish a Commission on the status of Women, Board members began exploring the diversity of women's voices within the association and the local community. One area of concern for the Houston Board of Directors was the paucity of young women's voices within the association. As a result, the Houston YWCA began evaluating its work with college women in the city. Although student YWCAs had been a part of the overall YWCA program for many years, Houston lacked any kind of thriving YWCA presence on the local campuses. With the growing unrest on college campuses during the 1960s, the YWCA determined that it needed to bring more social justice advocates into the association.

Student YWCAs played a role in helping women students find meaning in their lives, and local Board members understood the importance of education, the development of a capacity for leadership, and the important role they could play within the overall community. Although it stressed the association's concern with college-aged women during the 1960s, the Houston YWCA Board also recognized that it could not be concerned about college women unless it concerned itself with the total campus community that included men.

In an effort to reach younger women within the community, the Houston association proposed to extend numerous programs and to offer learning

opportunities to women on the local college campuses, including the campuses of the University of Houston and Texas Southern University. The intent of the YWCA's recruitment effort with women on the local university campuses was to engage women in meaningful relationships with the university community and to involve them with social justice issues in the city at large. Board members believed that a women's organization such as the YWCA needed to play a much larger role in local social justice issues.¹⁴ The association also hoped to assist women as they attempted to cut across barriers of age, background, and race to develop relationships with other adult women within the community.

The local YWCA's proposal for a pilot project with universities in the Houston area touched on the role of women in the community and coincided with the emergence of the women's movement of the 1960s. One question to be addressed by the Houston Board of Directors when proposing the program with the University of Houston and Texas Southern University was "can a woman's organization in a metropolitan setting be the instrument to help women students find meaning for their lives? Could it help women develop capacity for leadership, play an effective and responsible role on the campus and in the community, and develop satisfying personal relationships?"¹⁵

The Houston YWCA's attempts to appeal to the needs of younger women were part of a larger move on the part of the National Board to channel the

¹⁴ Proposal for Student YWCA in Selected Metropolitan, Urban Community, 1966, YWCA Collection, HMRC.

¹⁵ Ibid.

energies of young women into the mainstream YWCA programs. In its Association Review Report of March 1969, the Houston Board of Directors noted that it was important that the Board of Directors, Committees of Administration, and Metropolitan Administrative Committees reflect not only a cross-section of community interests and ethnic groups but also a greater involvement of women under the age of thirty in the decision making process.¹⁶ The report also stressed that the involvement of young women and those that were considered to be economically disadvantaged was a “goal still to be achieved.” The report also touched on the importance of developing and adjusting employee tasks to the available “woman power.” The term “woman power” was sprinkled throughout the report in relation to developing women’s potential and focusing on the needs of girls, women, and families.

In its recommendations from a 1969 YWCA Study Report, the advisory committee stressed the importance of adjusting the focus of the Houston association to address the particular needs of young women between the ages of twelve to thirty-five. Of particular note, the committee urged the local association to continue to highlight those social programs that had a special impact on women and girls and make those programs more visible to the public. The study encouraged the YWCA to continue serving women of the city through the development of a Women’s Resource Center for Information and Counseling,

¹⁶ Association Review Report, Houston YWCA, March 1969, HMRC.

and it stressed that the local association needed to hold citywide meetings and projects that related to women.¹⁷

The National YWCA offered support to the local association's recruitment efforts when it held a YWCA Young Adult Conference in East Lansing, Michigan, November 7-9, 1969. The work of the Houston Board of Directors in bringing the YWCA to younger women had begun to bear fruit. The Houston association sent the largest delegation from the southern region with nine attendees from the Metropolitan Program as well as the branches. The purpose of the conference was to articulate the role of young women in the Young Women's Christian Association and help change the leadership profile of the organization. Over five hundred young women attended the conference. Resolutions passed by the conference attendees focused on women's liberation and included a desire to increase child care facilities and the quality of those facilities as a way to allow women to focus on other concerns rather than child care. The attendees also exhibited support for the repeal of abortion laws. The conference also highlighted a desire for greater young adult representation on committees and boards.¹⁸

Two events hosted by the Houston YWCA during the 1970s helped to increase the level of involvement of both younger women and women of color.

¹⁷ Recommendations from YWCA Study Report for Consideration of The Study Advisory Committee and the YWCA Board of Directors, 1969, HMRC.

¹⁸ Report to the Houston Metropolitan YWCA Board on the National YWCA Young Adult Conference, East Lansing, November 7-9, 1969, HMRC.

First, the National Board of the YWCA awarded the 1970 national convention to the Houston YWCA and sponsored an African-American women's caucus prior to the national conference. Second, the Magnolia Park Branch of the Houston YWCA petitioned to host a national Chicana conference at the Branch in 1971. Each of these events, held in Houston, brought local Board members into contact with women of color who had very strong ideas regarding the needs of minority women.

The Houston Board of Directors had proposed during the 1960s to host one of the national conventions but had not been successful. YWCA delegates encouraged the participation and input of women of color in what it referred to as a "gentle revolution." Prior to the opening of the convention, approximately five hundred African-American women from 141 associations attended three days of meetings to discuss issues that were central to the efforts of the YWCA for the next decade. The African-American women agreed to attend the separate conference because they believed it to be "imperative that they develop strategies by which they could become deeply involved in the life of the YWCA through policy and program decisions and member participation and to enable them to be better able to shape the communities in which they live." The women examined the inclusive policy of the YWCA and found that the ideals of the policy and its reality were far apart. The women determined to "close the gap" between

the ideals and the practices. According to a statement made by the meeting attendees, African-American women would no longer “tolerate false liberalism.”¹⁹

The African-American women attending the three-day conference saw that they had a role to play in the elimination of racism, both within the organization and within their respective communities. They also combined the goals of eliminating racism with the attempts to bring about an end to sexual discrimination when stating that the YWCA must work to “revolutionize society’s expectations of women and their own self-perception.”²⁰ One way that the delegates believed the YWCA could achieve the goal of eliminating racism and empowering women would be to encourage greater participation in the YWCA by young women.

The excitement associated with hosting the 1970 convention heightened as the National Board determined to hold an African-American women’s caucus prior to the national conference. The African-American women met for several days prior to the national conference and explored the needs of women of color and what role the YWCA could take in meeting those needs. The discussions regarding racism and sexism contributed to the adoption of the “One Imperative” by the YWCA at the Houston convention.

The President of the Young Women’s Christian Association of the United States, Helen J. Claytor, recognized in her introductory statement, included in the

¹⁹ “An Historic Response—One Imperative for All,” in the *YWCA Magazine*, June 1970, p. 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

YWCA Magazine that the YWCA was a “widely divergent group of girls and women—by age, race, religion, nationality, political preference, economic status—gathered around a point of view to which we are deeply committed.” She went on to elaborate that “throughout its history [the YWCA had] been in the business of social change. . .” Claytor brought to the forefront the recognition of the diversity of the organization and how it could be used to facilitate change throughout the nation. According to Claytor, the strength of diversity was needed to “build the power of a great community of women across [the] land who truly believe in risking involvement in the shared struggle driven by the barrier-breaking love of God.”²¹

Leaders of the national YWCA believed that the nation needed the contributions of women to “reverse the tide of running toward ‘national self-destruction.’” Presidents of the various YWCA’s across the nation noted that “if women—young and old—will increasingly risk themselves as a viable potential force in the struggle for peace, racial and economic justice, [they] will gain new strength to demand of the leaders of [the] land—locally and nationally—a moral reordering of priorities and a reversal in policies and procedures that can lead us toward peace and justice at home and abroad.”²² Clearly the tone was set in Houston that all women, regardless of age or race, had a role to play within the

²¹ “United in a Shared Struggle,” by Helen J. Claytor, President of the YWCA of the U.S.A., in the *YWCA Magazine*, June 1970.

²² *YWCA Magazine*, June 1970, p. 2.

community and the nation. Local YWCAs had to find ways to embrace that diversity in order to have an impact in the world.

The event that brought the Houston YWCA Board to greater awareness of the diversity of women's voices was its hosting of the first national Chicana conference by the Magnolia Park Branch of the Houston YWCA. The Houston YWCA has a fairly lengthy history of working with Mexican-American women and developed the Magnolia Park Branch of the YWCA in 1949 to serve the Hispanic population in southeast Houston.

Women associated with the Magnolia Park Branch sponsored the Chicana conference from May 28 through May 30, 1971. Their main purpose was to discuss problems facing Mexican-American women. On June 22, 1971, the Magnolia Park Branch sent a report about the conference to the Houston Association Board of Directors that outlined very briefly the outcome of the conference. The business-like report touched on the expenses of the conference and some of the problems addressed during the three days of meetings.

What was missing from the report was recognition of the importance of the conference and the passion emitted from many of the women participants. Over four hundred women met to discuss the problems facing Chicanas. Within a short paragraph, the report pointed out that the diversity of the conference participants varied with great ideological, social, economic, and regional differences. More pointedly, the report proposed the argument that "no single

Chicana nor group of Chicanas” could speak “to or for the multitude of problems and approaches to solutions facing the concerned women of La Raza of today.”²³

The idea for a conference had originated in December of 1970 when members of the Magnolia Park Committee of Administration presented a proposal to the Board of Directors to host a National Chicana Conference in Houston during 1971. The Committee of Administration informed the Board members that a national Chicana conference had not been held previously. According to the Branch representatives, the Mexican-American women needed a conference to allow them an opportunity to sit down and discuss the needs that older and younger Mexican-American women had in common. For example, the use of the term “Chicana” caused a great deal of debate between the two groups. Many older generation Mexican-American women found the term offensive while younger women felt the term gave them some type of identity within the larger Chicano movement.

The Board of Directors asked many questions regarding the timing of the conference, the financial responsibility for the hosting of the conference, and how the conference tied into the overall plans of the National Board for the elimination of racism. Board members recognized that the Houston YWCA was one of only a few southern YWCAs that, in addition to a large African-American membership, had a significantly large Mexican-American membership. Therefore, the conference meant that the association would take on a great deal of

²³ Report from Magnolia Park Branch to the Houston Association Board of Directors, June 22, 1971, HMRC.

responsibility in the field of race relations as those relations pertained to Mexican Americans. But the local Board believed that its experiences hosting the African-American women's conference prior to the National Convention in Houston provided it with a basis upon which to build.²⁴

In January 1971, the Magnolia Park Committee of Administration reported back to the local Board of Directors that plans continued toward a May conference despite very little response from the national office. The local Board contacted the national office in New York immediately after the December 1970 Board meeting and asked for its input regarding the possibility of a national Chicana conference. By late January, the national office had not replied.

The women at the Magnolia Park Branch made it very clear to the local Board that they wanted to run the conference in their own way. Branch committee members had been in contact with Chicana women in California and had received advice on running the conference. The California women also offered conference materials and the names of potential speakers. According to the Branch Executive Director, the conference would focus on Chicana identity, communication between Chicanas, and techniques for changing those things that the women felt could be changed.²⁵

In the March 1971 minutes, Board members began referring to the Chicana conference as "La Conferencia de Mujeres por la Raza." The National

²⁴ BOD minutes, December 15, 1970.

²⁵ BOD minutes, January 26, 1971.

Board had still not responded to the Magnolia Park Branch confirming its support, yet the planning for the May conference continued. The Branch had appealed to Dorothy Height, founder of the Racial Justice Institute for the YWCA, but it had not received a reply from Height as to whether or not she would participate. The Board had also requested monetary aid from the M.D. Anderson Foundation for the conference but its officers had not replied. A representative from the Magnolia Park Branch informed the Houston Board that many of the Mexican-American women felt that the YWCA was failing the group because of a perceived lack of commitment.²⁶

Board minutes provide very little documentation to prove the Mexican-American women wrong in the assessment. Immediately prior to the Chicana conference, the Board of Directors' minutes included only one small paragraph about the impending conference. Blanche Flores from the Branch appeared before the local Board and reported that approximately four hundred people from across the country had registered for the conference though few women from the Houston area had signed up. When the Branch finally heard from the national office, they were informed that Dorothy Height was very excited about the conference.

The problem for the Branch, however, was a shortage of money. The only funds provided by the national office were for a resource person who would attend the conference. Those attending the conference were to be housed on

²⁶ BOD minutes, March, 1971.

cots at the Pasadena Neighborhood Center, at the YWCA, and in private homes. The Board President made an appeal to the individual Board members for them to help out in any way possible. Based upon information provided in the Houston YWCA records, there did not appear to be any major commitment on the part of the Board for assistance to the Branch.²⁷

The June 1971 Board of Directors' minutes only briefly mention the Chicana conference. One small section of the minutes referenced a summary of the three-day conference that was to be attached to the official Board minutes. The attached report was a one-page summary of the conference that elaborated on the results of the meeting. The most telling part of the summary was the opening statement that stated, "No quick summary can do justice to the three days of action experienced by the participants in Magnolia Park's historic conferencia of May 28-30, 1971."²⁸

The report noted remarks of conference attendees. It indicated that over four hundred women attended from twenty-five states and from strikingly diverse backgrounds. According to conference facilitators, the "role of the chicana appears to be threatening to the men of the culture and untenable for the women." Although there appeared to be disagreements during the three-day meeting, the conference hosts emerged with some successes. The conference produced a list of resolutions that each attendee was to take home and work on

²⁷ BOD minutes, May 25, 1971.

²⁸ BOD minutes, June 22, 1971.

locally, a decision to hold another conference in California during the following year, and the development of a system to keep the lines of communication open between Mexican-American women.

Many of the resolutions drafted during the conference echoed some of the same sentiments of the 1970s Chicano movement. Participants agreed with the Chicano movement that young Mexican-Americans should complete their educations, that federally funded programs should consider the needs of the Chicano communities, Chicanas who were committed to social action needed to organize, and Chicanos should unite together to discourage other Chicanos from enlisting in the military.

Disagreements arose on that Sunday as one group in protest walked out of the conference. According to the official report given to the Board of Directors, those walking out were the younger women who, according to conference facilitators, confused “the objective of unity with conformity” and walked out. The objections stated by those walking out included accusations that the participants did not relate to barrio women and that the conference was “too middle class.” Among the criticisms were disparaging words regarding the work of the YWCA. The report ended with a statement that the conference had “met its primary objective and over-met its anticipated response and attendance.”²⁹

The local Latino newspaper, *Papel Chicano*, included a more elaborate story regarding the Chicana conference. The Magnolia Park Branch had

²⁹ Memo to Houston Association Board of Directors on La Conferencia de Mujeres Por La Raza, June 22, 1971, HMRC.

advertised the conference in the *Papel Chicano* in February of 1971 and billed the conference as a way for women to “find their role in El Movimiento.” The same paper ran a story after the conference and reported that it was a “memorable event for the women of our Raza.” According to the report, the Saturday workshops were well attended and there was a great deal of enthusiasm among the participants.

The paper also reported that several groups became upset with the planning of the conference and their problems escalated into a disruption on Sunday morning. According to *Papel Chicano*, “After accusations and insults were hurled back and forth, emotions rose to a high pitch and a walk-out took place.” The paper confirmed that the principal participants in the walkout were “groups from California and Houston” and that the group complained about middle class participants. Of particular note was the group’s protest that the conference was being held in a racist institution such as the YWCA. The reporters for *Papel Chicano* did not disagree with those participants who protested the YWCA’s involvement but they went on record supporting “our ‘companeras de la Raza’ who organized the conference.” They criticized those who walked out by saying that the organizers “had more courage than many of us who refuse to participate and work within the present system.”³⁰

The Board of Directors gave little attention to the Chicana conference. Reasons for the shortsightedness are complex. As elaborated on in the previous

³⁰ *Papel Chicano*, Vol. I, Issue 11, February 3, 1971.

chapter, the Houston YWCA during the first half of 1971 battled with Model Cities for funding of its Crockett Street project. The financial difficulties faced by the association due to the delayed funding of the project put the association into a financial crisis. During the same period of time in which the Chicana conference was being planned and conducted, the bulk of the Board minutes relate to the financial difficulties being experienced by the association.

The May 25, 1971, Board minutes explain that over 1,200 people participated in Crockett Street programs during March of 1971 and almost 1,500 people attended programs during the month of April. The financial crisis led to concerns that the center might close and the Board minutes stated that the “people in the area are ‘shook up’ – some are militant.” In the May 25, 1971, report, three of the five pages of Board minutes elaborate on the financial problems with the Crockett Street center. Those same Board minutes, perhaps understandably, have only one paragraph relating to the Chicana conference.

After hosting the national YWCA convention and the first national Chicana conference, the Houston YWCA found itself struggling because of budgetary constraints to support initiatives aimed at improving the lives of Houston women. The difficulties associated with Model Cities funds, particularly as they related to the Crockett Street Center, often diverted the Board of Directors’ attention away from the women’s movement. The local Board, however, attempted to support initiatives proposed by the Magnolia Park Branch and to expand services to married women with families.

The Magnolia Park Branch continued to offer numerous programs that appealed to both single and married women in the Mexican-American community. In January of 1972, the Board of Directors received correspondence from two members of the Magnolia Park Branch YWCA regarding the closing of the only Day Care Center in the Magnolia Park area. The Mexican-American women consulted the Board in an effort to gain assistance in getting in touch with someone who could help with the day care problem in the area. The Board responded by suggesting that the women contact the Child Care Council and ask the Council to take under consideration the maintenance of some type of childcare facility in the Magnolia Park area.³¹

In addition to offering child care service at the Magnolia Park Branch, the YWCA focused on the needs of women needing to find employment. In April 1972, the Magnolia Park Branch offered a Job Conference for Women that it considered very successful because over four hundred persons attended. The job conference was a project of the newly developed Houston Women's Resource Center.

The Houston YWCA formulated its plans for a women's center after the development of a center by the national YWCA office. The National Board of the YWCA had formed a new unit in New York in 1970—the Resource Center on Women. The National Board wanted the center to contribute to efforts to “revolutionize society's expectations of women and their own self perception.”

³¹ BOD minutes, January 25, 1972.

According to the *YWCA Magazine*, the association planned for the Resource Center on Women to be both a research oriented endeavor and a center of activism. It had as its goal the empowerment of women to become facilitators of social change. The association recognized that it would be the first such center of its kind, one that was designed to help women bring about social change while clearing cultural hurdles that limited their abilities. The association envisioned such activities as developing strategies to combat the oppression of women, providing leadership opportunities, and aiding in the acquisition of services to allow women to live a fuller life.³²

The idea of a Women's Resource Center appealed to the Houston YWCA Board of Directors. The local YWCA proposed the development of its own Women's Resource Center in 1969 and began in September 1972 studying the goals and objectives of such a center. It asserted that the Women's Resource Center was necessary and within the historical thrusts of the Houston YWCA. According to a report presented by the Metropolitan Executive Director to the Study Review Committee and the Board of Directors, the YWCA was a Women's Center. The Center would make the development of "womanpower" a priority by offering leadership opportunities within the association and the community and advocating greater involvement of women in education and activities aligned with the public policy programs of the YWCA.

³² "Women and TheExpectations," in the *YWCA Magazine*, June 1970, HMRC.

The United Fund, in response to recommendations submitted by the Houston YWCA, did not support the initiation of a Women's Resource Center. The United Fund board stated in its report that it did not take a position on the merits of either the Women's Resource Center or a proposed Parent Education Program but it did indicate that it believed the administrative ability of the YWCA was already taxed and that any other responsibilities, in particular, the Women's Resource Center, would be unwise.³³

The United Fund committee did not minimize the importance of a Women's Resource Center. Instead, it pointed out that in order to evaluate the importance of the Center in relation to the community need, the Houston YWCA should request a thorough study by the Community Welfare Planning Council (CWPC). The committee even called the YWCA proposal "forward looking" and indicated that the community problems that the association described were indeed major social problems in Houston. But United Fund committee members were not sure that the YWCA was the "most appropriate agency" to address such diverse problems. It encouraged the association to continue with ongoing programs in the various branches that dealt with parent-child relations, mental health, drug abuse, unmarried mothers, sex relations, vocational information, and referral issues. The committee even proposed that the success of Jobs Conferences held by the local association provide an inspiration as to how to

³³ Excerpts from United Fund Study Recommendations and YWCA Study re: P.E.P. and W.R.C., September 5, 1972, YWCA Collection, HMRC.

address ways to work on some of the issues relating to the Women's Resource Center on a citywide basis.

The YWCA Board disagreed with the recommendations of the United Fund committee. The United Fund's response to the Women's Resource Center proposal did not reach the Houston YWCA Board of Directors until April 5, 1972. The Board in its January meeting decided to fund the Resource Center for one year, beginning in January of 1972. It provided a Center budget using monies already on hand.³⁴ It acted more on faith than sound financial tactics, as was evident in the January 25, 1972, Board minutes. In speaking of the decision to fund the Center, Board members stated that they hoped they could go to those supporting the establishment of a resource center and seek additional funding. The Board minutes noted that Board members would go to those who said "just show us you are sincere and that you can open the doors" and hope that "they will all come running with their money."³⁵

Through the hosting of the 1970 National YWCA conference, the African-American women's caucus prior to the conference, the national Chicana conference, and its determination to establish a women's resource center, the YWCA by the late 1970s had established itself as a center of activity regarding women's rights. At the same time, the city of Houston received the honor of hosting the International Women's Year Conference in 1977. According to a

³⁴ BOD minutes, January 25, 1972.

³⁵ Ibid.

letter from Hilary Whittaker, the Conference Coordinator from the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, one of the major reasons Houston hosted the 1977 conference was because the city had what the commission referred to as "an effective Women's Advocate in Nikki Van Hightower."³⁶ Van Hightower held the position of Houston women's advocate under Mayor Fred Hofheinz. Her position was the first of its kind in the country.³⁷ She had also served on one of the steering committees for the Houston YWCA. In response to the notification that Houston would host the 1977 conference, Van Hightower generated a letter that indicated that the commission placed such importance on the position of women's advocate, in part, because it "indicated support of the City Administration for the goals of the Conference."³⁸

The hosting of the International Women's Year conference led to the city becoming known by the end of the 1970s for its involvement with women's issues. And the Houston YWCA played a part in the changes that took place during the decade. The local association had refused to give in to the calls for merging with the Houston YMCA, had embraced the need for an African-American women's caucus, and had members of the Magnolia Park Branch

³⁶ Letter from Hilary Whitaker, Conference Coordinator and IWY Secretariat to Mayor Fred Hofheinz, October 20, 1976, HMRC.

³⁷ Van Hightower was a very controversial figure in Houston city government. Although she was appointed by Mayor Hofheinz as the women's advocate in 1976, by the time the International women's Year conference was held, her position had been eliminated and she had moved into the mayor's office.

³⁸ Memo from Dr. Nikki Van Hightower dated December 10, 1977, HMRC.

hosting the first national Chicana conference in 1972. Although one cannot conclude that the emergence of “women power” in Houston was a direct result of the work of the local YWCA, one can say that the association acted as a conduit for change. The Houston YWCA refused to give in to the wishes of its funding agency and instead made it possible for women’s voices to be heard much more clearly in the city.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Houston's hosting of the International Women's Year Conference in 1977 seems a fitting ending to a study examining the social reform programs of the Houston YWCA. It is also a perfect vantage point from which to evaluate the activities of the Houston YWCA and to examine the social reform role taken on by one of the oldest and most active women's organizations in the city. The Houston YWCA expanded from a small endeavor started by several middle and upper class women in the city to an association thrust into the middle of the burgeoning women's movement of the 1970s. And throughout its history, the Houston YWCA found itself a major player in local social reform.

From the time of its inception through the World War II era, the Houston YWCA functioned as an active and vital women's organization. The early preventive nature of the YWCA programs in many ways endeared the association to the citizens of Houston. The association definitely established its place among other social service organizations operating for the benefit of women. Although the association's collection includes scrapbooks filled with pictures and newspapers documenting the social activities of the YWCA, the records from the Houston Board of Directors paint a picture of both a city and an organization constantly having to adapt to changes wrought by the growth of Houston and changing attitudes regarding women.

But during the post-World War II era, the Houston YWCA initiated a slow but definite change in its approach to working with women. Beginning with the adoption of the Interracial Charter in 1946 and extending through the adoption of the "One Imperative," in 1970, the National Board of the YWCA slowly began pulling local associations in line with national policies. While it remained an association for women, by the 1950s and 1960s, the YWCA had become a women's organization marketing itself as a "women's movement." For the Houston association, the women's movement came right to their doorstep in 1977.

Active participants in the history of the Houston YWCA included middle- and upper-class women on the Board of Directors, paid professional staff members, women program participants, and a diverse group of women members. Men also played a role in the organization as financial advisors to the Board. The services offered by the association were almost always funded through charitable contributions made either directly to the YWCA or to such an agency as the United Fund. Trained professional women directed the programs offered by the association and many of those women came to the Houston YWCA from outside of Houston. Some even came from outside of the state. It was through the paid staff members that the Board made itself aware of the wishes of the members. Otherwise, the Board members seemed to have little contact with YWCA members. As has been presented, contact between the local Board and African-American and Latina members was even more infrequent.

The Houston Board of Directors also had contact with local business leaders and national YWCA employees. And as the only consistent voice available to researchers working on the Houston YWCA is the voice of the Board members, contacts among Board members and local business and civic leaders are important. Through such connections one gains a glimpse into the relationships between Houston women and male political leaders, married and single women, women of various economic classes, and women of color.

Two of the more interesting questions that needed to be addressed when examining how women fit within the overall plans for Houston's growth and maintenance of social order were, what role did the women play? and if women achieved positions of power or influence, did they seize that power or were they granted that power by another group who did not feel threatened with the empowering of women or women's groups?

The records of the Houston YWCA indicate that women indeed played a significant role in serving the needs of women in the city while at the same time propelling citizens forward in terms of racial inclusiveness. In addition, the women of the early Houston YWCA found themselves empowered by local civic leaders to carry on programs that benefited the city. And later in its history, the Houston association in many ways seized power and took control within its realm even when other, often male, leaders tried to deny power to the YWCA.

Susan Lynn, in her book, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times*, elaborated on how women, such as those women affiliated with the YWCA,

found the voluntary association to be a way to have a voice in the reform efforts of the city. She pointed out that middle-class women found that they could involve themselves in political affairs during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through their participation in women's voluntary organizations.¹ She continued by noting that the women associated with the voluntary associations used numerous techniques to exert some influence over local civic leaders and to have some voice in public policy. Such techniques included investigating social problems, educating the public on various topics of concern, and creating direct social services to aid those in need. It is a fairly accurate description of women associated with the Young Women's Christian Association.

But those techniques did not end when women gained access to the elective franchise and, in theory, had access to formal electoral politics. Women associated with the YWCA continued to adopt similar methods to play a role in the civic activities in their local communities. As the Houston YWCA records have shown, the Board played a large role in educating the public regarding race relations, the rights of women, and the plight of families living in poverty.

The Houston YWCA's formation at a time when Houston experienced dramatic growth, both economic and population growth, placed the local association's women in a prime position to play a role in the city's development.

¹ Susan Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times: Racial Justice, Peace, and Feminism, 1945 to the 1960s* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

Although the national YWCA had been offering residence facilities and recreational activities for many years prior to the establishment of the Houston YWCA, for Houston, such services were relatively new. The large influx of women into the city and the shortage of what many citizens considered “appropriate” housing for those women, allowed the women sitting on the Houston YWCA Board of Directors an opportunity to offer their services to city leaders. The need for an orderly growth meant that the local YWCA’s offer to provide assistance was welcomed. Therefore, the women of the YWCA Board of Directors, because their services were needed, found themselves in a position of power in the city.

Anne Firor Scott’s comments regarding women’s associations often noticing problems within the community and bringing them to the attention of local political leaders is significant to consider here.² In the case of the Houston YWCA, it appears that civic leaders came to the association as often as the association went to the political leaders. The Houston YWCA’s emergence at a time when Houston began its growth as a major southern city allowed the association to work hand-in-hand with political leaders to develop the type of city they desired.

The women sitting as members of the Houston YWCA Board of Directors had access to pertinent information and to the needs of political leaders and local businessmen who hoped to turn Houston into that thriving southern metropolitan

² Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies*, pp. 104–110.

city. Their connections to local leaders, either by relation or by marriage, provided them with the necessary clout to acquire the monies needed to operate an organization caring for the needs of employed, single women. And throughout its first seventy years of operation, funding was a critical issue for the Houston YWCA. In order to keep the local association financially solvent, women had to appeal to people and organizations in control of the funds, be it through annual capital campaigns or through such organizations as the Community Chest, the United Fund, the Office of Economic Opportunity, and Model Cities.

Studies of the national YWCA have tended to focus on religious aspects of the organization or the operation of an African-American branch by a white central association. But few, if any, have looked at the association from the vantage point of funding and how the need for funding could often dictate the support for YWCA programs within a city. Granted, the local Board of Directors received guidance and directives from the National Board of the YWCA in New York, but local associations had to justify their programs and their requests for monies, often by showing how the programs benefited the city.

As seen during the early years of the Houston YWCA, the Board of Directors found that justifying its requests for money was fairly easy. Women's voluntary associations were riding a wave of popularity during the first two decades of the twentieth century and the cities often embraced many of the ideals of social reform. For example, when Houston faced the reality of African-

American soldiers being stationed in the city during World War I, local civic leaders called upon the Houston YWCA to perform a role considered appropriate for women: that of role model and protector of women. And as national YWCA war worker Josephine Pinyon noted when she tried to convince Houston leaders to build a YWCA Hostess House at Camp Logan, it was also important that the women of the local YWCA were prominent Houston women.

The comments made to Pinyon that Houston citizens would not wait around for directions from New York, coupled with a statement that Houston men would build a new activities center and residence for the YWCA women during the 1920s, illustrate the importance given to the fact that the YWCA leaders were local, well-respected women. Instructions by one Houston male leader to the YWCA to put less emphasis on professionalism while attempting to develop a more native leadership, indicate that the appeal of the Houston YWCA was often tied to the women sitting on the Board of Directors. During the World War I era, the local women on the Board never lost the favor of those in political power.

But the willingness to support monetarily the expansion of YWCA services during the 1920s became contingent upon the local Board's willingness to continue to perform services considered appropriate by the local funding agency. When the Board of Directors made its decision to become a member of the Houston Community Chest, the YWCA found itself a bit subject to the direction of outside influences. And even though a YWCA Board member sat as a member

of the Community Chest, the YWCA Board found that it had too little influence over funding decisions.

The annual campaigns were very tedious and time consuming but they placed the Houston YWCA, when it appealed for funds, in the spotlight. The decision to become a part of the local Community Chest lessened the burden of the annual campaigns but had a profound effect on the association. As the Houston YWCA noticed very early after becoming a part of the Community Chest, monies given by a central organization often came with strings attached and expectations were often high.

The relinquishing of fund raising to a central agency also caused the Board to have to take on responsibilities that were in some ways counter to the initial purpose of the association. Whether it was working to solve the juvenile delinquency problems of the 1920s and 1950s or assisting with New Deal or War on Poverty programs, the local association was called on to act as a social service agency.

During the mid to late 1920s, the Board of Directors' minutes record complaints lodged by women on the YWCA Board regarding Community Chest appropriations as the monies allotted to YWCA programs failed to meet the association's project expenditures. As the uncertainty of a changing society began to be felt in the city, particularly the emergence of the "new" woman and problems with juvenile delinquency, Houston civic leaders began looking for solutions to the problems. Even though the Houston YWCA had provided a

remedy for the ills of a growing city during the 1910s, its program in the 1920s did not always fit well with the needs of city leaders. When funding increased for family programs, YWCA funding often decreased. It was not until the YWCA Board members agreed to study female juvenile delinquency problems and work to bring about a reduction in the delinquency rates in the city that the local association began to recoup some of its losses from the Houston Community Chest. Speaking out against girls working in root beer and frozen custard stands, however, brought about antagonisms with working-class women and girls. It was during the decade of the 1920s that the local association had its first struggle with determining what was appropriate for all women as opposed to just middle-class women.

Monies flowed to the Houston YWCA throughout the decade of the 1930s as the association again attempted to meet the needs of an underserved segment of the population. The provision of federal funds also gave the local YWCA a greater role in the city's relief efforts. The association offered unemployed women a place to live and an opportunity to ply their trade at a time when very few agencies could afford assistance. But tensions between the Houston YWCA and the United Fund continued through the 1960s and early 1970s and, according to the Board of Directors' minutes, made it difficult for the association to determine the best course of action for the association to take without having to first approach the United Fund.

But as the Houston YWCA tried to maintain its balancing act of meeting the needs of women while appeasing its funding source, it also had to consider increasing directives from the National Board regarding interracial cooperation. For a southern association, directives for greater interracial cooperation caused numerous problems. Beginning with the Houston YWCA's work with African-American soldiers and their families at Camp Logan, the women on the Board of Directors had to learn how to bridge the chasm existing between the two races in the city. It is evident in the Board minutes that such learning continued through 1977.

The first direct tie between funding and interracial cooperation was found in the Board of Directors' minutes during the late 1930s and early 1940s. It was during those years that the association contemplated including the Blue Triangle Branch Committee of Administration representative on as an ex-officio member of the Board. But it is hard to imagine that the tie between funding and increased interracial cooperation was not a major consideration prior to the late 1930s. The great care exhibited by the women on the Board of Directors in attempting to establish a camp for African-American girls in Kemah during the 1920s shows evidence of a fear of losing the support of the association's funding source--the citizens of Houston.

Another indicator that funding issues often dictated early YWCA programs involved the relationship of the white women sitting on the Board of Directors and the African-American women of the Blue Triangle Branch. Throughout the

1920s, the Board of Directors' minutes are filled with admonitions to the Blue Triangle Branch Committee of Administration regarding fiscal responsibility and fund raising for branch programs. Board members had a difficult time understanding that the branch was an integral part of the overall Houston YWCA. Even visits from national YWCA staff members had very little impact on the relationship between the two very separate entities. When one examines the discussions during the 1920s regarding fears of upsetting Houston residents owning property in the Kemah area and discussions during the early 1940s about an African-American Board member, it appears that the white Board members found it difficult to justify allocating too much money to the branch. And the strict racial segregation of Houston did not help white Board members gain a greater understanding of the dynamics of interracial cooperation.

The combination of appeasing a funding source and trying to avoid alienating public support for the association placed the Board of Directors in a precarious position when broaching the subject of interracial cooperation. But the records indicate that the Houston YWCA's actions, or sometimes lack of action, were not out of line in relation to other YWCAs throughout the country. National YWCA leaders noting that they could only move as quickly in improving race relations as both the white and African-American women wanted to go illustrates how the national association understood that local YWCAs had a tricky task at hand.³

³ See Chapter II notes.

It is important to remember here that many “voices” are missing in this story. Records in the national YWCA collection indicate increased interracial activities among business and professional women of the Houston YWCA and women associated with the Blue Triangle Branch.⁴ Yet the voices of the professional staff members are only heard in small sections of reports sent to the national office on a yearly basis. It is clear that, although the professional staff members and the women associated with the business and professional women’s clubs attempted to embrace the interracial directives of the National Board, their experiences remained isolated in relation to the actions of the Houston Board of Directors.

Records from the post-World War II era, though, indicated a gradual change on the part of Board members regarding the balancing act between appeasing the association’s funding source and adhering to National Board directives. And after the war, the Houston YWCA began to flirt with the idea of seizing power and influence as it began to involve itself more fully in local race relations. The Houston association during the late 1940s seemed to be quite busy offering educational workshops, seminars, and classes “exploring” the issue of race.

Comments from members of the Houston Board indicate a concern regarding the local association’s position on race relations. On more than one

⁴ Houston Business and Professional women often took on leadership roles at interracial workshops designed specifically for businesswomen.

occasion, Board members commented that they were not taking a particular stand on interracial cooperation but were rather offering educational programs to help others understand the dynamics of racism. By taking an educational approach to the problem, the Houston Board of Directors could keep its funding source happy while appearing to abide by National Board dictates. During the 1940s, Board members often participated in some of the most visible programs designed to highlight interracial cooperation.

The educational pattern continued through the 1950s and 1960s as the Houston YWCA dealt with the civil rights movement and the war on poverty programs. The Houston association opened its cafeteria to African-American patrons in 1955 but made sure that there was no fanfare associated with the integration of the facility. During the same time period, the women on the Board continued to “learn” about racism. And although one could question whether or not the educational approach was a way of avoiding the greater issues associated with racism, what does come across in the minutes is a lack of understanding and experience on the part of Board members when trying to eliminate some of the detrimental effects of racism. When examining the script given to women answering the YWCA phone regarding the racial integration of the association’s cafeteria, what is most telling is the scripted reply that not many of “them” came to the cafeteria. The YWCA’s “Negro patrons” did not abuse the privilege and would not show up in large numbers where they were not welcome. The whole notion of institutional racism seemed foreign to the Board members.

By the 1950s and 1960s, other forces besides funding began to play a larger role in the activities of the Houston YWCA. As African Americans and Latinos clamored to make their voices heard, the local YWCA had to take notice. But by the 1960s, monies began to become available for work with various minority groups and those living in poverty. Financial difficulties experienced by the local association contributed to the Board's decision to participate in War on Poverty programs. Again, as was seen in Chapter V, outside agencies and local political and social leaders approached the Houston YWCA to offer programs designed specifically to aid women and girls.

At the same time as funds became available for anti-poverty programs, the women's movement began to strengthen. The combination of available monies and the escalating voices of women allowed the Houston YWCA to, at times, take on roles appearing to be against the wishes of the United Fund. Although uncertain of continuing Model Cities funds for the Crockett Street Program, the Board of Directors believed the project too important to discontinue. And the primary target for those Crockett Street Programs were women and young girls.

The opening of the Women's Resource center provides another example of the Houston YWCA taking on a project it deemed necessary and worthwhile but against the wishes of the United Fund. Tapping into its connections with prominent business leaders, the Board found the funding necessary for the center without the aid of the United Fund. But during the early 1970s, other

forces came into play to convince the association to look beyond funding issues when determining the programs the association would offer to women. The emerging feminist movement of the late 1960s, the hosting of a national Chicana conference, and the hosting of the national YWCA conference, seemed to propel the local Board of Directors toward making the needs of women their number one priority.

The threat of a merger with the YMCA during the decade of the 1960s also seemed to solidify the association's resolve to serve the needs of all women in the city. Even though the YWCA had weathered encroachments by the YMCA on their turf prior to the 1960s, it was during that decade that the United Fund truly began contemplating cuts in funding for programs duplicated by both the YMCA and the YWCA.⁵

One of the more poignant conclusions that arises from the study of the Houston YWCA is that the Board of Directors often had a great deal of difficulty understanding differences in women's voices. At the time that the association came into being in Houston, the purpose of the organization seemed relatively clear. The Board wanted very much to assist the young women coming into the city, to help them find proper boarding facilities, and to protect them from what the Board members perceived to be the evils of the urban environment. It was

⁵ See Jodi Vandenberg-Davis, "The Manly Pursuit of a Partnership between the Sexes: The Debate over YMCA Programs for Women and Girls, 1914–1933," *Journal of American History* Vol. 78, No. 4 (March 1992), 1324–1346.

very much a maternalistic approach to serving women with upper-class women of the city caring for, and attempting to direct the actions of, employed women.

The establishment of the Blue Triangle Branch of the Houston YWCA brought African-American voices to the forefront but the Board struggled to understand the needs of African-American women. The racial segregation existing in the city made it very difficult for the two divergent groups of women to find a common meeting ground. The women associated with the Blue Triangle Branch continued to struggle in their relationship with the Board of Directors for many years. The separation of the Blue Triangle Branch from the YWCA and its transformation into the Blue Triangle Multicultural Center in 1999 seems to point out that those problems continued to exist even beyond the years of this study.

Although the Houston YWCA moved at an early date to open its facilities to African-American women and girls, the reality of that integration continued to lag behind the initial opening of all facilities to all women in the mid-1950s. The fact that the Houston YWCA Board of Directors' minutes in the 1970s discuss learning more about institutional racism illustrates that although the Houston YWCA facilities were open to women of all races, difficulties remained in understanding that African-American women were indeed women to be served by the association.

The Houston YWCA Board of Directors' involvement with Mexican-American women further enhances the idea that the Board had difficulty understanding that women's voices were different based upon race and ethnicity.

The Magnolia Park Branch's hosting of the first National Chicana conference in the United States was a major undertaking and one that succeeded, as far as attendance is concerned, beyond all expectations. The dearth of information regarding the conference in the Board of Directors' minutes, and the seeming lack of involvement on the part of the Board, point to a failure on the part of the Board to understand the importance of the conference to Mexican-American women.

The assertion that the YWCA was a racist organization by some participants of the Chicana conference and the apparent split between two vocal groups attending the conference provides an interesting question to explore. Was the Houston YWCA truly a racist organization? Was there overt racism by Houston YWCA representatives, in particular, on the part of the Board members? Susan Lynn noted in *Progressive Women in Conservative Times* that the YWCA considered demands by African-American women to aid them in improving the conditions in the African-American community but the white women often appeared unwilling to challenge racial segregation in a meaningful way.⁶

But Lynn also found that organizations such as the YWCA provided opportunities for interracial cooperation that possibly did not exist anywhere else in the city.⁷ And the Houston YWCA's hesitancy to take a stronger stand regarding racism within the city can certainly be tied to fears regarding its

⁶ Lynn, *Progressive Women*, p. 8.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 9.

perception by local citizens and the potential loss of funding. If it lost favor with the community and lost a significant portion of its funding, the association ran the risk of ceasing to exist. And if it ceased to exist, who would take on the programs the association offered to women throughout the city?

Even with the struggles with interracial cooperation and the changing attitude toward the women's movement, the association flourished in the city during the time period before 1977. The Houston YWCA became a social service provider very early in its history and continued in that role for many years, with its primary concern being girls and women. The makeup of the girls and women participating in YWCA programs, however, changed over the years as more women of color became affiliated with the local association and as the Houston YWCA extended its services to lower income families through the war on poverty programs. And as the women's movement began to gather speed, the Houston YWCA successfully resisted attempts to force it to merge its programs with the YMCA, and established itself as both a women's organization and a women's movement. Its participation in the 1977 National Women's Year Conference, the Houston YWCA illustrates its reassertion of goals.

In the final analysis, the Houston area Young Women's Christian Association proved to be an asset to the city. The Board of Directors, because of its contacts with the local business community and various political leaders, often determined when and how to implement the dictates of the National Board in order to cause the least amount of turmoil. And even though the Board of

Directors often resisted change, as it related to increasing interracial cooperation, it is apparent that the association was one of the leading organizations pushing for change. It was a women's movement in the city as well as a social service agency. When the lines of distinction became blurred between the YWCA as a women's movement and the YWCA as a social service agency, the association seemed to struggle in its attempt to define itself. But in areas such as social welfare, the local YWCA oftentimes played the leading role, fostering a number of useful programs to both the city and the women residing in the city. The Houston YWCA, despite some of its failures, could look back on the eve of the National Women's Year Conference in 1977 and see itself as a major women's organization in a major metropolitan city.

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