Entry type: Organisation
Entry ID: AWE4883

Young Women’s Christian Association of Canberra

(1929 -)

Born	19290101
Occupation	Community organisation, Not for profit organisation, Women's organisation

Summary

The YWCA was invited to Canberra by the Federal government in the mid 1920s and established itself there in 1929. While a separate organisation, from its establishment the YWCA of Canberra received significant support from the national and global Young Women’s Christian Association movement.

The organisation has grown with the local community, providing at first services focused on meeting the physical and spiritual needs of young women coming to work in the new city through the provision of hostel accommodation and recreational activities, such as singing, physical activities, skills development and leadership work. From these early activities, it developed into a community service for women and their families, responding to local and changing needs. The present organisation aims to contribute ‘practical feminism’, serving local communities, advocating for social change and assisting women to achieve their potential.

Details

The first General Secretary, Ms Hilda Tapley Short ('Tapley') arrived in Canberra in March 1929 and took on the task of establishing the YWCA of Canberra. She was faced with significant challenges at this time, including lack of funds, the beginning of the Great Depression and a new capital with a population of less than 4000.

Tapley's early work focused on providing hostel accommodation, social activities for the local community, recreation and social support networks and skills development. There was also significant focus on establishing the structure and governance of the organisation to ensure that the YWCA would be here to stay.

During World War II, the YWCA provided support to soldiers, public servants and their families. The YWCA building became an important focus for wartime activities and aimed to provide servicemen with entertainment and companionship in a family style setting. Leave House was opened in a temporary weatherboard hostel in Mort Street and began the organisation's long involvement in providing accommodation to women and girls. After the war, Leave House became a much needed hostel for young women who were not entitled to government accommodation.

The 1960s saw significant programs built around young women. Services were provided for women under 18 years old through Girl Citizens and Reserve Girl Citizens and to married women new to Canberra with few supports and networks. The YWCA became a vital way for women to become involved in their local community and build friendships. Plans were also in place to rebuild the hostel, and in April 1970 the Una Porter Centre was opened by HRH Princess Anne. This building provided a 61-bed hostel, a gymnasium, and art and craft, conference and meeting rooms.

The 1970s saw the second wave of feminism, and the YWCA continued to contribute in both practical and broader ways, and to advocate on issues of importance to women such as child care. The YWCA also provided some of these childcare services. The Spence Neighbourhood Centre, 'The Lady Heydon Centre', was opened and became one way to connect with the suburbs and provide services for women and their young families. New program areas continued to develop through the 1970s and 1980s as additional needs emerged.

The last few decades have seen further evolution of the organisation as both a significant community service provider and a strong women's advocacy organisation. Today the organisation employs 300 staff, operates throughout Canberra in 20 different locations, and provides services across the areas of children's services, youth services, homelessness and accommodation, community development, training and women's leadership. The organisation is committed to changing the community through the leadership of women and to nurture the leadership of young women through its governance, membership and program work.

Published resources

Newsletter
YWCA Canberra newsletter, 1967

Resource
YWCA Canberra,
http://www.ywca-canberra.org.au

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

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