



"The reason people keep coming to us and stay with us is that we're really a movement," says YWCA director Helen Neill, "We're always in the process of becoming."



The YWCA Isn't What (She) Used To Be

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Sentinel Staff Writer

You don't have to be young, you don't have to be a woman and you don't have to be a Christian to enjoy the activities offered by the Young Women's Christian Association.

I wanted to know why this is so, so I interviewed Helen Neill, director of the Santa Cruz YWCA, and came up with some intriguing information.

The traditional Y concept as a young women's sheltering residence hall, or of a gym and swim club, was shattered long ago. There still are these, but in Santa Cruz and many other areas the thrust has been and is entirely different.

Where could you go in this town and find, all under one roof and at the same time, a group of folks in their 80s rousingly singing "Standing on the Promises"; younger and middle-aged women sweating out exercise classes and toddlers happily at play?

Helen sees the progress of the YWCA as a women's movement.

She told me some interesting facts to bear out this view.

To start at the beginning, the YWCA was formed in England in 1850 by a group of women who had served as nurses in the Crimean War. Opposed by their clergymen and many of their families, these newly returned women were determined to preserve their independence. And so they established inexpensive, safe, clean housing, set up recreational programs for themselves, and called it the YWCA.

This was an age when women traditionally either married and established their own homes, or remained with their families or other relatives for the rest of their lives.

But it was also the beginning of the industrial revolution, which brought factory jobs for women. The Y then became a safe refuge for women workers who had left their homes to find jobs in the cities.

Further, many married women who were fairly well educated and aware of the inhumane conditions under which their sisters were working, began crusading for fair labor laws. And they became members of the Y.

The YWCA came to New York City in the late 1850s, and became directly involved with the Bureau of Labor in establishing fair labor practices for women and children.

Thus, the YWCA movement was on its way.

To give an insight into the thinking on women and work during that period, Helen relates, "In the early 1870s, the Y started the first typing class for women — at that time, all the secretaries were males. A physician had to be in attendance at the classes, because it was thought that typing was physically dangerous for women!"

As the Y expanded through the years, it offered recreation for women of all ages, thus dispelling the need for the first word, "Young".

You still have to be a woman to join the organization, and Santa Cruz has 800 members. But you don't have to be a member to enroll in a number of the classes, and here is where the men are allowed. There are quite a few coed classes there — such as Yoga, bicycle repair and sewing — and there is a men's consciousness raising class, in which men explore their feelings, reactions and experiences with the women's movement, and learn to communicate better with women as liberated human beings.

So, the second part of the title, "Women's", is no longer entirely valid. As for the next word, "Christian", Helen explains, "In the 1960s, a landmark decision was made at our national convention. It states, "We are a pluralistic movement, open to people of all religions or no religion".

Will the word "Christian" then be dropped one day? "It comes up at every convention," Helen says, "But, historically, we sprang from the Judeo-Christian tradition, and that's where our roots are, so we retain the name."

And one thing the Y is firm about — it is controlled at all levels by women. They make the decisions — as Helen says, they need to know they have the ability and the power to make the decisions.

How are choices on YWCA activities made?

The focuses which Helen says are strong at the local Y now are on the woman who suddenly has a little more time to pursue interests because her children are older and her husband is well established in business; and on the woman who is raising a child or children on her own.

For the first woman, the Y offers a class in values clarification, which helps her begin the process of sorting out what is important and not so important in her life. It helps her decide how she wants to use the time that is now free to her — and once that decision is made, the Y offers her a rich menu of activities.

For the second, Helen says, "More and more single women are heads of families, and our society hasn't provided support prior to this."

She is speaking of the whole spectrum of single parent families — from the woman who bears a child out of wedlock, and chooses to keep him, to the single woman who chooses to adopt a child, as well as the

divorced or widowed woman trying to raise her family alone.

"The single parents that we see want the same things for their children that two parents want — enrichment, qualitative education, recreation, and so forth," Helen says.

"We want to see that family survive. It frightens me that there are single parents trying to raise children with no support, and that unit breaking down."

Helen says that any direction that women begin to go in will be the Y's thrust.

"We're interested in the condition of life of women and girls — interested in having them look at themselves and reassess their lives. It isn't necessary to put limits on your horizons — within reason, anything is possible.

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An Announcement

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"A lot of the things we do here are in direct response to input from individual members," Helen says, "And nationally, this is the way it works. There is input from the local Y boards to the national board. And the direction we go is in direct relationship to the people we're serving."

DUM-DE-DE-DUM! Stacy Davenport, left, and Narry Caldwell musically draw attention to the fact that the annual Parks and Recreation Christmas Wonderland show is coming up November 5-7 at the Civic Auditorium. Stacy, a Brownie Scout, will decorate a tree and Narry is show coordinator. Individuals and groups who wish to participate may apply at the P and R office or call Diane Folven at 426-5000, ext. 213.

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