

YWCA Canberra – A Brief History



In 2015, YWCA Canberra is 85 years old.

When it was established in 1929, it was the baby of an organisation that had taken shape in Australia in the 1880s and which itself was part of a growing international movement.

YWCA Canberra's growth is bound up with the growth of Canberra as a city, and it has shaped itself in response to its changing local and broader contexts.

“Shall we accept the challenge to take the Blue Triangle to Canberra? The spirit and atmosphere of this capital where our laws are to be made will influence our nation's destiny.”

Mrs Cowen, Miss Griffin and Miss Tapley Short
Report on Canberra, YWCA Australia, 24 October 1928

On 21 March, 1929, Hilda Tapley Short, AKA 'Tapley', alighted at Canberra Railway Station from Melbourne and took on the task of establishing the YWCA in Canberra. National YWCA had been in negotiations with the Federal Capital Commission to establish services appropriate to young women in what was essentially a building site.

Other YWCAs in Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart helped raise the 6000 pounds required to purchase rooms in a new building at the corner of Alinga and Mort streets (now East Row and City Walk).

The YWCA of Canberra soon became known for its progressive attitudes and less restrictive membership requirements. Early supporters included women and men who were leading figures in the development of the city and had its community life at heart.

During the Great Depression, when public servants salaries were reduced, the YWCA of Canberra opened an employment bureau, which focused on wages, conditions and training for household employment.

“Let our slogan be ‘construction work in progress, workers wanted’.”

Mary Stevenson
President's Foreword, Annual Report, 1941

During the war years, members of the YWCA were very active in fundraising, organising war aid activities, joining groups like the Voluntary Aid Detachment, and they initiated 'open house' entertainment for servicemen. The association also opened its first Canberra women's hostel in 1942, beginning our long involvement in providing accommodation to women and girls.

In 1945, the YWCA of Canberra responded to calls nationally for a greater 'youth' voice in the movement by making several organisational changes, including moving its meeting times so that young, working women could attend.

“After the War, the President, Mrs Bird, was keen to start a Young Marrieds Club for women who were more or less housebound with new babies. The women were very happy to come out at night, meet new women, have a chat and learn a craft. Many friendships developed.”

Margaret Nicholas

In the 1950s, the organisation also ran an 'Open House' on Sundays for newly arrived migrants, providing friendship and services to newcomers to Canberra.

"We are more than an Association, we are a Movement, well fitted to overcome barriers. This year we have moved. The process is both exhilarating and exhausting but we have no intention of halting. The pace, in fact, is increasing."

Bronwen Murdoch, General Secretary
Annual Report, 1962

Canberra went through enormous growth from 1958-1965, and the Canberra Y kept pace, with a renewed focus on training and staff development bringing a new professionalism to the organisation. It was during this time that child minding was offered alongside the Y's ever-increasing range of classes and activities, a foreshadowing of the later expansion of child care within YWCA Canberra's work.

There was an increased focus on working with young people in the 1960s, which saw the YWCA of Canberra create a youth department with its own committee and finances, and employ experienced and qualified youth workers.

It was during the 1960s that the organisation also embarked on an ambitious and complex plan to move to larger premises. Despite the difficulties, plans finally became reality. The building was named the Una Porter Centre by Princess Anne in 1970 and opened by Una Porter herself in March 1971. The floors owned by the YWCA of Canberra in the new building provided a 61-bed hostel, a gymnasium, and craft, conference, and meeting rooms.

While the work was flourishing, the changing social landscape of the 1970s was challenging the foundations of the YWCA, both in Australia and at world level. The wider YWCA movement was advocating deeper awareness of social issues and the needs of particular social groups, which meant investigating ways of supporting groups such as the young unemployed, newly arrived migrants with young children, Aboriginal families, working mothers, and women escaping domestic violence.

YWCA of Canberra was successful at this time in attracting government funds for low-cost child care and work with unemployed people.

In 1974, the organisation purchased a government house in Belconnen to provide a facility that would help develop a sense of community in one of Canberra's newer suburbs. It was used extensively for craft activities, migrant English classes, women's discussion groups and community meetings.

But the greatest demand was for preschool activities. As such, YWCA Canberra became increasingly involved in the provision of low-cost child care.

This quickly expanded to holiday programs, occasional care and family day care.

"Some members are critical of the concentration of resources in the [child care] field, but this is to take a narrow view... The current arrangement frees women to pursue other activities to help them develop their full potential and that is what the YWCA aims to do."

Margaret Geddes, Acting President
Annual Report, 1981

During this period, the YWCA of Canberra also made the decision to use its hostel to provide low-cost 'welfare' accommodation to meet the needs of the homeless. In the years following, the hostel provided permanent residence for young people leaving Canberra's Youth Refuge, students and others in need, including a Polish refugee and her children.

Despite differences of opinion, traditional and newer approaches to responding to community needs continued alongside each other. The Y's 'New Directions' report in 1986 introduced a 'service delivery' approach to the Y's activities with a focus on young women aged 12-20 years, children under five years, 'housebound' women and ageing women. It also marked the formation of a Young Women's Action Committee, and more streamlined approaches to management at Board and staff levels.

While feminism and a commitment to social justice gave a philosophical focus to much of the Y's work in this period, the organisation faced a continuing challenge to integrate this focus with its more traditional profile and with its growth as a community service provider. Generational change became a pressing issue.

"Significant numbers of our current membership are older women who have faithfully supported the YWCA for years... We certainly need to look at our own future."

Ethel McGuire, President
Annual Report, 1990

In 1990, the YWCA of Canberra developed a new corporate plan, with an operational mission statement committing the organisation to establish a higher profile in the local community, establish a strong membership base, promote quality services for women, improve the status of women in the local community, support the interests of women served by national and world YWCA movements, effectively and efficiently administer assets and strive to maintain financial independence, and provide a model of sound employment practices.

In the mid '90s, the Y delineated a clear division between Board and management responsibilities. The process of redefining these rules rejuvenated staff and Board members for the expansion that was underway. Raising the Y's profile became a concerted effort.

*"Dear Editor,
For some considerable time the substitution of YMCA for YWCA when your newspaper prints items or job advertisements relating to the YWCA of Canberra has caused us a great deal of frustration. Each organisation has a different history and purpose and is separately incorporated. It is difficult for the YWCA of Canberra to maintain its own public identity when your newspaper appears to be working against us."*

Ann M Quadroy
Letter to the Canberra Times, 5 June 1996

Throughout that period, the Y continued to see child care as an essential service to working women, and the feminist philosophy underpinning the service was articulated more strongly over time. By 1999, despite the struggles with financial viability caused by government funding that waxed and waned, the Y was running four child care programs (Lyneham, St Thomas More's, Campbell Cottage and Conder).

As a result of the organisation becoming more politically aware and change oriented, the Y developed a number of women's leadership and wellbeing courses during this period, including Women Influencing Leading and Deciding (WILD). The Y also spoke out on a range of contentious political matters, initiating and participating in campaigns on abortion law, sexual assault and sexist advertising.

By 2000, as a large service provider, YWCA of Canberra had become a major player in a community sector increasingly taking responsibility for responding to disadvantage and social exclusion. The Y entered the new millennium with 20 programs and 19 projects in housing, youth services, child care, women's services, advocacy and training.

While the organisation had spoken out on issues of violence against women in previous periods, in this decade the organisation developed a clearer sense of its role within the broader women's services sector.

The YWCA of Canberra worked with other women's services to organise a forum during the 2001 Week Without Violence.

"The last 12 months has seen an unprecedented discussion by the community on the issues of sexual assault. A topic not usually discussed, we are now publicly debating issues such as what is consent, communication between men and women, and how masculinity is defined in our society."

YWCA of Canberra media release, October 2004

The organisation's preparatory work on violence prevention culminated in May 2007 with the launch of the Relationship Things booklet. The booklet was designed to prevent violence by supporting young people to develop safe, respectful relationships. Since, *Relationship Things* has become a stream of work that includes posters and a resource kit to assist professionals working with young people.

"The booklet is designed to play a part in encouraging relationships where each person is safe and respected and has the right to choose YES or NO!"

YWCA of Canberra media release, 2007

During this time, YWCA of Canberra also refined its tendering process, to give it more control over its own destiny. This resulted in the ability to self-fund work that it deemed important but for which it didn't receive external funding. This allowed resources to be put towards women's leadership initiatives, advocacy, events and community campaigning on issues affecting women and girls. Since 2006, a Board-led process of long-term strategic and financial planning has enabled the organisation to fund work identifying and responding to changing community needs.

In the past few years, new projects and achievements include the establishment of the Great Ideas Small Grants Program in 2010, the launch of the She Leads Diploma of Management in 2013, the inaugural She Leads Conference in 2014, and the grand opening of YWCA Canberra's Computer Clubhouse in Tuggeranong in 2014.

2014 also saw the YWCA of Canberra become, simply, 'YWCA Canberra' and launch a professional new look via a changed logo and new website.

For a more comprehensive history of the organisation, copies of the book *A work in progress: A history of the YWCA of Canberra, 1929-2009* are available by calling 02 6175 9900.