

The Lincoln YWCA: Its Contribution to the Women's Movement and My Development as a Feminist — By Barbara Laur

Beginnings

In the 1970s, state and local forces, further inspired by the broader women's movement, were at the forefront of dramatic progress to better the status of women in Nebraska.

In 1974, the Nebraska Commission on the Status of Women opened its doors to the public and quickly became an effective advocate for women. A group of activists formed the Nebraska Coalition for Women, a statewide collective of women's groups that could move quickly and aggressively press for legislation. Lincoln's mayor Helen Boosalis (1975-1983) initiated the Lincoln-Lancaster Commission on the Status of Women, which hit the ground running both as a part of the statewide effort and to tackle issues at the local level.

During that time, in June, 1978, I joined the Lincoln, Nebraska YWCA staff as a program director. Up until then I had minimal connection to the women's movement and the Y had been a fairly traditional, non-activist organization. But the Y was on the verge of change, and so was I. Shortly after I arrived, the Y hired a dynamic new director, Sheryl Schrepf. She was a perfect choice to take the Y toward a more feminist and activist orientation in keeping with the times. The Y's programming expanded and deepened to better address the needs of contemporary women, and the organization forcefully joined with others to advocate for women's rights. In the five years I was on the staff, I changed as well. I became a "card-carrying" feminist, an identity I have embraced ever since.

The Positive Influence of the National YWCA

The national YWCA had some intrinsic aspects that enhanced its contribution to women and the women's movement, and that were influential in shaping my views.

Mind, Body, Spirit

A holistic approach - "mind, body, and spirit" - was a YWCA principle at both the national and local level. The Lincoln Y's programs were far ranging and at the time I was there, drew a diversity of women. While our programming and advocacy definitely moved in a feminist direction, the Y still had the capacity to respond to women who were in a different place politically. For example, the fitness programs remained strong throughout, and the Y sustained a longstanding weaving program (a constant source of friction in a growing organization because the looms permanently occupied a large space). The range of Y programs sent the message that for women to be as whole and as powerful as they wanted and needed to be, they needed to be strong mentally, physically and spiritually.

I loved working in an environment that supported good health in all these ways. I had the opportunity to exercise my creativity, gain self-confidence, and deal with my issues around body image and eating. I overcame the sedentary doldrums of my 20s and became a physically aware and active person. I began a lifelong practice of dance, got my first massage, learned how to lift weights, and ran a marathon.

The One Imperative

At its 1970 convention, YWCA delegates unanimously adopted the One Imperative: "To thrust our collective power towards the elimination of racism, wherever it exists, by any means necessary." Institutional racism was addressed in national training events and each local Y was tasked to undertake an "action audit" to better examine itself in terms of the imperative. My first deep exposure to the imperative was at a national training for emerging local staff leaders. For me, the introduction to the concept of institutional racism was revelatory. This understanding of institutional bias was easily transferred to women and other disenfranchised groups and has affected my work and thinking ever since.

I was the staff support person for the action audit committee, where we explored every area of our organization and recommended ways that we could better represent a diversity of women and support the imperative. One thing that stuck with me over time, for example, was the importance of diverse visual images. This kind of thinking about diverse representation is common today, but at the time many organizational brochures and other materials used images dominated by white people.

Nationally, thousands of women went through the leadership trainings, and locally many thousands more were exposed to the action audit. The one imperative was an important pillar to incorporate as the Lincoln Y moved more strongly in a feminist direction.

Building Women's Leadership

Even today, YWCA boards of directors are women-only. In the period when I was at the Y, the board was comprised of 30 members. There were always at least 15 committees of the board; each board person was either a chair or co-chair of a committee, and the committees often included women (and men) who were not on the board. This was a huge volunteer effort to manage on the staff level, but it gave many women a chance to experience and develop their leadership. And it provided the most robust volunteer effort I have experienced in my nonprofit work.

The staff was not limited to women-only, but at the time I worked at the Y, only the janitor was a man. I had a woman boss and women colleagues and worked mostly with women volunteers. Though we sometimes had to deal with by-products of women's socialization such as passive-aggressiveness and discomfort dealing with power and anger, we were mostly a united and powerful female force.

The YWCA was the first workplace in my nonprofit career. Most of the organizations I've worked at since have been majority women on staff; two others were women-serving. Dynamics have improved as women's status and awareness has improved. I have enjoyed working with women and felt privileged to serve with women leaders and be one myself.

Programming

Physical Fitness

Fitness and exercise classes were standard programs of YWCAs, and I give credit to my colleague and physical education director Joann Eickoff for making the most of an older building and limited resources.

We had a very small swimming pool which was inadequate for swimming laps, so we offered water fitness programs for older women and swimming classes for children. We kept the pool nice and warm, perfect for those purposes. We had a large room with a great wood floor that was ideal for the development of an extensive dance program. Our weight room was small and modestly equipped, so we focused on training women how to use weights. We offered classes in massage and self-defense, as well as individual fitness consultations. We partnered with Womenquest Inc. to create an all-women outdoor adventure program that included local backpacking and cross-country skiing activities, as well as multi-day camping and hiking in places like the Grand Canyon and Utah's Canyonlands.

Beyond Fitness

I was responsible for a range of programs that were not fitness oriented. I adopted some programs from my predecessors, but I also created new ones. I was new to program development, open to any and every interesting idea, and encouraged to "go for it". Offering a wide and ever changing menu of programs gave me a great job and the Y a new face. I met many people who became great friends through our collaboration. For example, Mary Owen, a counselor from an agency across the street from the Y, offered to teach an assertiveness class. She taught the class initially and then I co-taught it with her. Looking back we realized that we were still learning to be assertive ourselves, but somehow we found the confidence to teach others.

The programs ran the gamut, among them:

Personal growth/mental health:

Celebrate Yourself, Living Single, Creative Anger, Decision Making and Goal-Setting, Women and Money, The Magical Player Within Me, Journaling, Big Beautiful Women and Clothing, Women's Reality, A Place of Your Own, Feminism in Our Lives, And They Lived Happily Ever After (debunking the myth), Risking, Female Scripting, The Gentle Art of Verbal Self Defense, The Heroine's Journey, Issues in Choosing Parenthood, Mirror, Mirror: Body Image and Self Esteem, Fat is a Feminist Issue, Twentieth Century Women Writers, Words and Women (the treatment of women in the English language), Women's Stories/Women's Quest (learning to tell our own heroic stories).

Sexuality:

Dealing with your Adolescent's Sexuality, Female Sexuality (for men only), Male Sexuality (for women only), Body Image and Sexuality, Our Sexual Selves.

Practical knowledge:

Hammers and Nails (home repair), Nuts and Bolts: Auto Care for the Non-Mechanic, Football Facts for Women (it was Nebraska, after all).

Career development:

Writing for an Audience, The Sum of Its Parts: Group Problem Solving and Techniques, Assertiveness in the Workplace, Manager's Roundtable, Job Seeking Skills, Speaking Up, Storyboarding, Time Management, Money Matters (budgeting), Women on the Rise (for upcoming managers), Media for Nonprofits, Sexual Harassment.

Spirituality:

Ancient Goddesses, Creative Simplicity, Visualization, Awakening the Inner You, Meditation and Guided Imagery.

Creative arts:

Poetry Writing for Women, Weaving, Calligraphy, Needlepoint, Watercolors, Photography, Stained Glass.

Brown Bag Lunch series:

Meet the Senators, Women's Issues/Society's Concerns, The Economy: Bringing it All Back Home, Generation to Generation (older Lincoln residents share their wisdom), Creative Survival: In and Out of Work in Hard Times, Men and Women Changing, Women in the Arts, Parents and Children: Relating, Farewell to Arms?, Fat, Thin and Eating in America.

Some of these programs had a direct message connecting to feminism; most of them were oriented to women and women's experience.

One of my favorite programs, and one I was most personally impacted by, was a class on eating, weight, and body image. The class was inspired by a book called "Fat is a Feminist Issue" by Susie Orbach. When I first saw the book at the Lincoln Public Library, I laughed. My first thought was "Is everything a feminist issue?" (well, almost). I checked it out and read it, and shared it with Executive Director Sheryl Schrepf. She was interested in it and as moved by the ideas as I was, and we decided to offer a class on the topic. The offering was popular; Sheryl and I taught the class several times and then handed it off to other facilitators.

The book by Orbach explained the pressure women feel about their bodies, regardless of their weight, and helped me understand the pitfalls of dieting deprivation. It gave me new insights into my relationship with my mother, and the importance she placed on feeding and nurturing her family. As a result of reading the book and sharing the concepts with other women, I quit dieting forever, learned to love eating and cooking, and let go (as much as possible) of worries about how my body looked. I abandoned some of the frustration I felt about my mother's "obsession" with food and was able to see her real love (and talent) for cooking and her genuine enjoyment of feeding people.

One program that ended up challenging the Y internally was a salon for women, a Friday night series that was generally arts-oriented. The program was designed to be a woman space and explicitly advertised as "An Arts Event for Women". All was well until the husbands of two of the presenters showed up, expecting to be in the audience. They weren't aware it was a women-only event, so I got to give that message, which was not well received. We went ahead with women only in the audience. The next day, a few staff people at the Y shared that they were also very upset that we had turned the men away. In response, I wrote a long letter to the women and their husbands about the origins and purpose of the Salon (interestingly, the planning committee had thought intentionally about the value of including men as participants but decided in favor of a women-only experience). My letter was shared

with staff and followed by a number of individual conversations internally; we did not always reach agreement but we did have a chance to air our different viewpoints.

Special events

In addition to workshops and classes, I also had responsibility for a number of special events. Here are a few that had particular resonance during these times:

Tribute to Women

We initiated an annual event honoring accomplished local women. It was a luncheon awards presentation modeled on a national YWCA program, and continued for many years.

The Way We Are

This alternative fashion show started with a presentation about women and body image. Attendees then “toured” the Y, exploring a variety of fashion options: exercise clothes, clothes from local retail shops, hand-made/crafted clothing, lingerie, international attire and thrift store items. The models were diverse in race/ethnicity, size, ability and age. The event was ambitious in just about every way and could have been more effectively executed. But the ideas were right in line with our thinking and programming at the time.

Men’s Conference

Later in my tenure, a group of men approached the YWCA about hosting a conference for men only. Knowing that men’s growth was essential to changes for women, we took on the challenge. A friend and I worked with a men’s committee to plan the event, then left it to the committee to facilitate the day’s event. At some point along the way, we asked the local YMCA to co-sponsor, but they declined. The conference was going to address some issues, i.e. sexuality, that I’m guessing the YM was uncomfortable with. By then the YWCA had a track record offering programs that synced with this event – seems the men came to the right organization to help make it happen.

Advocacy

Along with its surge of new program development, the YWCA became active on a number of local and state issues related to women. We hosted the annual women’s Legislative Forum, and made meeting space available for women’s groups. We were an active member of the Nebraska Coalition for Women. The Y supported me in cutting back my work for a year so I could serve as chair and speak publicly for the Coalition, and I also served on the Lincoln-Lancaster Commission on the Status of Women.

The Y’s Board also took stands on state and local issues. After some discussion, for example, the Board endorsed a Lincoln Commission on Human Rights proposed amendment to add lesbians and gay men to the list of groups protected from discrimination. The amendment went to the Lincoln City Council, where it was approved. Later, the opposition put an initiative on the ballot to reverse this decision, and we found out just how unpopular this idea, and how great the bias, was citywide – the provision was voted down 76%-24%.

In all of this work, the Y never crossed the line for activities allowed by a nonprofit, but the organization demonstrated just how much a service-oriented nonprofit could advocate to further women's rights.

Next stages at the Y

Over time, starting with my final years at the Y, the organization began to move in the direction of more in-depth "helping" programs. The New Directions Center, a program funded with displaced homemaker funds, was initiated to help women in transition. The weaving room was finally replaced by a more extensive youth program. After I left, a former volunteer became executive and led the process to turn adjacent YWCA property into affordable housing.

Eventually the Y moved out of its historic downtown building and ended its fitness program. Today's Y, from what I can see of their website, is minimally staffed and has a strong focus on programs for girls. This has been the direction of many YWCAs, despite the growing focus on physical fitness. The Lincoln Y made the most of an elegant old building but couldn't keep up with the local YMCA, which was always better funded and resourced.

The programs that replaced the old kaleidoscope of "mind, body, spirit" offerings at the Lincoln YWCA were critical and needed. But there was a beauty, and some financial logic, to the YWCA of the 70s and 80s. Membership fees brought in a good share of funds, as did fitness and other programs, reducing reliance on grants. Women of various incomes, ages, viewpoints, and racial/ethnic backgrounds found the YWCA a comfortable space to learn and grow. This diversity brought a wide range of community support and also lent a more "real world" experience and perspective to our efforts.

The programs that did not necessarily come from a feminist perspective were powerful for women. One of the more traditional offerings, the weaving program, served mostly a group of older women committed to the craft of weaving and to the support of one another. The fitness programs helped women get stronger and more comfortable with their bodies.

Times change, and organizations need to change with them. In the 1970s and 80s leaders at the Y found a way to change that was in keeping with times and positioned a century old organization to play an important role in the efforts to advance the status of women.

Organizations Matter

Highly visible individuals provide voice and inspiration for movements but they need to be bolstered by organizational power for us to realize our goals.

Organizations are the nurturing ground for many (mostly) young people who are formulating their ideas about how the world works, and what they want to do with their lives. For me, my work at Y was a critical juncture which shaped me for the rest of my life. In addition to my activity at the Y and in the Nebraska women's movement, I became more involved in politics and activism overall. I was a founding member of the Nebraska Progressive Coalition and an active volunteer working to pass and later defend the Lincoln gay and lesbian rights initiative. When I moved to Iowa, I stayed involved through Cedar

Rapids and Des Moines NOW chapters, and was on the board of the Gay and Lesbian Resource Center of Des Moines. Today I'm less connected to organizations, but I follow politics closely and in most elections, you can find me door-knocking somewhere in the DC metro area. I will always identify myself as a feminist.

An organization can be a place where people get their sense of what working together looks like. In the best situations, they can see that people are treated fairly, all voices and roles are respected, conflicts are aired and resolved directly, leaders are effective and know when to step down, staff are decently compensated and recognized, a sustainable funding base has been built, critical infrastructure exists, and innovation and change are welcomed.

An organization's promise is diminished when they are dysfunctional and flawed internally. Since I came to the Y in 1978, I have worked as a permanent staff person in three different women-serving and one environmental organization. In my current role as an interim executive in the Washington, DC area, I have led another 12 nonprofits. I also have been involved as a volunteer in various organizations. Unfortunately, I have as often as not seen good aims slowed or stalled by internal problems.

I have always felt thankful that my experience at the Lincoln YWCA was my first in the nonprofit world. The Y was not without its challenges. Like many organizations, we brainstormed constantly about how to save and raise money. There were some "rivalries" between different programs, and we didn't always communicate as directly or effectively with one another as we should have. Some committees didn't function well, and some events took too much effort for the return. But overall our mission and principles were clear and our leadership – both staff and board – was strong. The staff worked collegially, and innovation and change were welcomed. The organization had redefined itself and was thriving. I saw what a functioning nonprofit could do, and I had an experience that deeply influenced my thinking, my career, and my sense of self.

For those of us "inside", we need to do our best to assure that we build organizations that are healthy, long-lasting and effective, and that leave a powerful, positive impact on the individuals who volunteer and work in them. I have seen how that can be done, and I know if we can do that, we accelerate the progress we all want to see.