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"WE ARE NOT FREE
TO DO NOTHING"

As the decade of the 1960's began, issues of racial segregation moved to center stage for the YWCA, as well as for Nashville generally. Although movement was sometimes slow and uneven, by the middle of the decade the YWCA had made significant progress in integrating its programs and facilities. In Nashville during the early years of the sixties, sit-ins and marches began to break down some of the barriers of segregated public facilities, but many private organizations remained segregated. Nashville Mayor Ben West had diffused some of the tension associated with integration by meeting marchers on the courthouse steps and telling them that he thought the segregation of public restaurants was wrong. A short time later, lunch counters in downtown Nashville including the YWCA cafeteria were integrated.

Since the association could not raise the funds needed to build a gymnasium and pool at the Blue Triangle Branch, the Blue Triangle Branch sought an alternative solution to its space problems and need for recreational facilities. The Branch Committee realized that the Seventh Avenue gymnasium and swimming pool were no longer being fully utilized. Although offering classes at the Seventh Avenue building was not their first choice, the Branch Committee saw this as an alternative to branch expansion. When the Branch Committee came to the executive committee of the Board to ask for permission to use the swimming pool and gymnasium, they were told that "our recreational facilities are not open at this time." "It was stated that interracial activities include civic and educational



The Blue Triangle Branch annual banquet at Tennessee State University

organizations meeting on the second floor with or without food service, staff meetings, inter-committee meetings, World Fellowship observance, inter-group conferences, and the cafeteria."¹ The association Board was adamant that it would not change its unwritten policy prohibiting African Americans from using the Seventh Avenue facilities.

In October, 1962, eight student nurses from Memphis coming to Nashville for the state nursing examination made a reservation to stay at the central YWCA in Nashville. When the young nurses arrived at the YWCA and attempted to check in, they were informed that there had been a mistake in the reservations. Since these young women were African American, they would have to stay at the Branch. They were told that the central YWCA was "for white girls only." The YWCA's policy of segregated accommodations was unwritten, but it had not been challenged.

The Blue Triangle Branch director Doris Outlaw spoke out in opposition to the denial of the rooms and wrote a critical article which was published in a local African-American newspaper, *The 780 Countdown*. She expressed her concern for the YWCA saying, "This proved to be the most embarrassing incident I had ever encountered

for the YWCA. The disappointment to me was that the YWCA missed again the most wonderful opportunity to stand up and be counted as a Christian organization with a Christian purpose." Outlaw called on volunteers from the African-American community to speak out against the YWCA's policies. The newspaper followed the Outlaw article with an editorial calling on the YWCA to change its policies. "This, indeed, is good reason to protest. It is reason, too, we submit, for the YWCA to either take "Christian" out of its title or to start implementing practices of the ideal in all of its aspects."²

The women of the Blue Triangle Branch were united in their belief that segregation of the YWCA was morally wrong, but it was difficult for them to challenge the organization in which they had been so personally involved for so many years. The Branch Committee returned to the association Board and asked that the Board establish a new interracial committee to study problems of racial concern in the YWCA. The secretary reported that "the motion passed with much discussion." In November, 1962, YWCA executive director, Bethann Van Ness, attended a meeting with the Nashville Christian Leadership Council at the branch in which she expressed the policies of the Board to maintain separate facilities for women of color. The relationship between the branch and the association deteriorated rapidly. The association Board voted unanimously against renewing the contract of the branch director, Doris Outlaw even though Outlaw had received a unanimous recommendation from the Branch committee. A registered letter of the Board's decision was sent to Outlaw and the association Personnel Committee immediately began to search for an interim branch director. The Branch Committee would no longer have authority over the branch.³

Several meetings occurred during the Spring of 1963 about the integration of the YWCA. A group of eleven women calling themselves The Committee of the Concerned asked for a meeting with the Committee on Administration of the Blue Triangle branch. "This is not an attempt to ridicule anyone, rather it is an honest effort to be intelligently informed of the facts so that we may be in a position to evaluate more judiciously the state of affairs and to help preserve and promote in the community the Christian principles upon which the organization was founded. In the crucial struggles that confront us on every hand, Negro women may unite and disagree, but we cannot afford to divide and fight." The Branch Committee, however, was reluctant to allow this meeting to be held at the branch. The Committee of the Concerned responded by calling a mass meeting at the Clark Memorial Methodist Church on April 1, 1963 to discuss the YWCA. All the speakers at the meeting reiterated their beliefs that the YWCA's Blue Triangle Branch was "not a branch, but a separate, unequal YWCA for Negroes."⁴

The association Board took the step of integrating the association Board and then considered recommendations from a Liaison Committee of the Blue Triangle Branch which recommended complete integration of the association programs and facilities. There is no record that the Board voted on these sweeping changes, but on October 16, 1963, Carrie Hull attended her first association Board meeting as the first African-American Board member of the Nashville YWCA.⁵ During Hull's first meeting, the Board discussed opening membership to Negro members, but postponed voting on a new policy. Some wanted open membership with restricted participation.



Three YWCA stalwarts: Mrs. S.H. Watson, Mrs. Alvin Jones and Miss Mary D. Shane

Katherine Anderson, Nashville President, attended a national conference in Memphis to discuss complete inclusiveness in the YWCA. Anderson's report to the Executive Committee reflected her acceptance of integration of the YWCA. "We are not free to do nothing," she told the Board echoing the theme of the Memphis meeting. Anderson returned to Nashville feeling that Nashville had made more progress than many other Southern associations. She reported that the Memphis association was going to call its Central building, the Downtown Branch and recommended that Nashville follow Memphis's example. At the end of the report on the Memphis meeting, the executive committee voted unanimously to recommend to the Board that the next quarter's announcement of classes have the classes offered at the branch and the classes offered at other locations listed together by hour and location. This mailing would go to all YWCA members - the Branch members and the members of the Central association. This recommendation was approved by the full Board at the next meeting. The Board never directly voted to open its facilities. The YWCA had functioned since its beginning with an unwritten policy of separate facilities. Now they adopted another unwritten policy of open, integrated facilities. When this occurred the Branch Committee asked the association to assume administrative responsibility for the branch. The 1964 President's Annual Report stated that the Central Association and Blue Triangle Branch became one YWCA with one executive director in January, 1964. The following year, at the request of the UGF, the board reaffirmed the interracial policy of the YWCA. It was not until 1967, however, that the downtown residence was integrated.⁶

In a period of five years the YWCA's cafeteria had been integrated, the association Board was integrated, and the downtown and Blue Triangle Branch had tacitly integrated their classes. Integration of the downtown residence would follow in 1967.



Notes:

- ¹ Minutes, Executive Committee, 30 October 1961.
- ² *The 780 Countdown*, 26 October 1962. YWCA files, TSLA.
- ³ Minutes, 17 October 1962, 21 November 1962, March 20, 1963.
- ⁴ Outlaw file, YWCA papers, TSLA.
- ⁵ Minutes, Called Meeting, May 20, 1963.
- ⁶ Minutes, 2 December 1963, 15 January 1964, 19 May 1965, Annual Meeting, April 17, 1968.