

THE TENNESSEAN

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Here is the progress YWCA has made in 125 years serving the Nashville area | Opinion

As we look to the future, I am confident that YWCA Nashville & Middle Tennessee will continue to be a powerful force for positive change in our city.

Sharon K. Roberson Guest Columnist

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Key Points

Sharon K. Roberson has served as President & CEO of YWCA Nashville & Middle Tennessee since 2016.

“Why not in Nashville?” Harriet Brown wrote these words to the Nashville American newspaper in 1898. The businesswoman was a member of the Young Women’s Christian Association in Boston and had difficulty getting a room while visiting Tennessee’s capital city.

Soon after her letter was published, the Nashville YWCA was founded, inspired by a vision of a better future for women, children, and families in our city.

This year marks the 125th anniversary of our historic and ever-evolving nonprofit organization.

YWCA Nashville & Middle Tennessee has grown and adapted over the years to meet the needs of this community.

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How the racially segregated branches of the YWCA eventually merged

Our history is rich but, at times, complicated.

Once split by the segregation laws of the Jim Crow South, Nashville had a White Nashville YWCA and an African American-led YWCA Blue Triangle Branch. The YWCA Blue Triangle Branch had been at the forefront of advocating for social and racial justice.

The African American women leaders of the Blue Triangle, including Juno Frankie Pierce, were key players in the women's suffrage movement. These women also urged Congress to pass anti-lynching laws, even before the murder of Emmett Till brought national attention to these crimes.

The Nashville branch provided programming and safe and affordable housing for those who moved to Nashville for work and/or school. Pauline LaFon, the future wife of Albert Gore, Sr. and mother of former Vice President Al Gore, lived at the downtown YWCA building on Seventh Avenue for three years while she earned a degree from Vanderbilt Law School.

The Blue Triangle and Nashville branches merged in 1964. Many celebrated this newly integrated and inclusive YWCA that has continued its work addressing the most pressing issues facing the women and youth in our community. Our mission is to help them overcome challenges and unique obstacles and reach their full potential. We offer hope. Throughout the years, we have implemented a variety of programs and initiatives to help women, children, and families be safe and succeed.

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The YWCA's work spans multiple areas and generations

Today, YWCA Nashville & Middle Tennessee is the largest provider of domestic violence services in Tennessee. We provide safe housing and support services to survivors and their families at the Weaver Domestic Violence Center.

Our trauma-informed work includes counseling, financial literacy, and children's programming. We recently celebrated the first birthday of Abbie's Safe Home, the state's largest domestic violence pet shelter, so pets and their people can heal together. The Weaver Center is essential in combating domestic violence and providing necessary resources to those affected. We fight hard to keep these families safely together. Victims can find support from their peers at the shelter, making them feel less isolated and empowered. We've passed laws to

protect and educate the public. We have been a beacon of hope and strength for thousands of women and children.

YWCA offers education and career services through our Family Learning Center to help individuals develop the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in their careers. We provide professional clothing and training through our Dress for Success program.

Editorial: Ashley Judd, Sexual Assault Center and YWCA honored as Tennessean People of the Year for civility

We are committed to empowering the next generation of leaders through our youth programming, focusing on building self-esteem and inspiring girls to be strong, smart, and bold through our Girls Inc. program.

We are cultivating healthy masculinity and respect and working to end gender-based violence through the AMEND Together program. Nearly 1,000 students take part in these programs locally each year.

As we look to the future, I am confident that YWCA Nashville & Middle Tennessee will continue to be a powerful force for positive change in our city. We urge our community to honor this milestone by supporting our vital services. By showing our support for the YWCA, we can ensure that our mission will continue for many years to come. Together, we can create a brighter, safer future for all.

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Women of Achievement

YWCA will begin celebrating its 125th anniversary with the 31st Academy for Women of Achievement on Thursday, Jan. 26. This annual event recognizes inspiring and groundbreaking women leaders who have made a difference in our community. The 7 women and one organization will join 184 other women, and 33 organizations honored previously with this distinction. Learn more and purchase tickets at <https://www.ywcanashville.com/events/awa>