



Growing Up With The **YWCA**

by Chris Hayes • Photography by Jason Collins



As girls become women, their experiences with the YWCA differ in nature – from day care to social functions to female empowerment. As the YWCA has gotten older, it has evolved to serve the needs of that time.

By those standards, Suzanne Turner and the YWCA grew up together.

“I started taking swimming lessons there when I was 7 years old,” said the Executive Director of the YWCA of Palm Beach County and self-proclaimed YWCA product.

Turner also learned to dance there. As she got older, those lessons paid off when the local YWCA would sponsor her school’s first dance of the season, the Harvest Moon Ball. Turner was also active in a group called the Y-Teens, the largest social group of her Western Indiana high school. As she entered adulthood, the YWCA continued to provide support.

“I remember when I was going to New York looking for a job...one of the things my mother told me was, ‘Well, you’ll stay at the YWCA.’”

Today the YWCA is much more than a social club and youth hostel, and Palm Beach County’s Y is no exception. Established in 1917, it serves the need of every age group. There are two nationally certified child development centers – one at 1009 N. Sapodilla Ave. in West Palm Beach and the other at 1030 Royal Palm Blvd. in Royal Palm Beach. Turner’s childhood club, the Y-Girls, is still in existence, serving girls from 9 to 13 years old by providing mentoring, community service, career education and other services.

The Y looks out for women of all ages. Their 24-hour domestic violence hot line offers food, clothing, case management and legal assistance to all women and children, as well as two bilingual outreach counselors. Those women who require housing will find shelters in a number of undisclosed locations all over the county.

Over the course of 2007, the YWCA served over 550 women in children in their shelters. Given the opportunity, that number would be higher, but most nights the shelters reach maximum capacity.

“When the economy starts going down, you start seeing a rise of domestic violence. So, we’re on overload.”

The YWCA is the county’s largest provider of domestic violence services to women and children. They receive reports from both the police and hospitals in order to contact pos-

sible victims and actively collaborate with the Palm Beach County Domestic Violence Council. Despite having the largest domestic violence shelter in the county, they often must count on other shelters to handle the surplus and utilize arrangements with a number of hotels for temporary assistance.

Transitional housing is also offered in the Glades area for women and children who require a lengthier stay and need help getting back on their feet.

“They can stay there for up to two years as long as they are in some kind of training or education program.”

The slogan on the YWCA’s pamphlets reads “Eliminating racism, empowering women” because though each community’s Y may differ, they all have programs established for racial justice and women empowerment. The goal is to create opportunities for women to grow and become leaders who are both culturally and socially aware. However, this was not always their greatest focus.

So why was there a need for this shift?

“Because the needs of women have changed,” Turner said.

With an increased propensity in single-parent homes and females as primary breadwinners, the need for skill training and other economic advantages has become more imperative. Whether it’s children, young adults or women who just need a new start, the YWCA is there to provide a leg up.

As Executive Director, Turner does everything from raising funds, overseeing the programs and grading agencies to finding the necessary funds to fix a broken pipe in one of their buildings.

The YWCA’s influence in Palm Beach County is only limited by their support. Given the right funding, Turner would have the YWCA build a skills center to allow for more job opportunities and develop twenty to thirty Y-Girls programs throughout the county instead of their two locations in Riviera Beach and West Palm.

So no matter how old you are, the YWCA is here to help. As it’s stated on their Web site, “The corporate ladder can be climbed in heels.” **PBG**

More information on the YWCA of Palm Beach County can be found by phone at (561) 640-0050 or on their Web site at www.ywcapbc.org. The Harmony House 24-hour crisis line can be reached at (561) 640-9844 or (800) 937-9922.