

## **The Berkeley Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA)**

### **Supporting Female Students Since 1889**

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### **Introduction**

Women's organizations have had a long history of supporting women in Berkeley. One of the earliest women's organizations closely associated with the Berkeley campus is the Berkeley Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). This Berkeley branch of the national YWCA was started in 1889 when seventeen out of forty female students on-campus gathered together for a Bible study group (Ladies Blue And Gold, 18). The YWCA has evolved from being a conservative to a progressive women's student organization and always remained in a close relationship with the university. In this essay, I will elaborate on how the YWCA has supported women in Berkeley from its early days in 1889, and how it has evolved. I conducted three interviews with: a former executive director, a current executive director, and a long-term board member of the Berkeley YWCA. They discussed the history, current programs, and social services offered by the local YWCA.

### **Early History of the Berkeley Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA)**

The YWCA was founded in the United Kingdom in 1855 and spread around the world quickly (World YWCA, 1). In 1858, the first YWCA in the U.S. was formed in New York City.

On March 10, 1889, the Berkeley YWCA was initiated as a Bible study group. The early mission statement of the YWCA was to “build a fellowship of women and girls devoted to the task of realizing in our common lives those ideals of personal social living to which we are committed by our faith as Christians” (YWCA USA, 1).

Student members first used the North Hall, the “Ladies Room” on campus, as their meeting room for Bible study. In January 1893, Stiles Hall at Allston Way and Dana Street in Berkeley became the home of the Berkeley YWCA (Clemens, 104). “There is a room for the young ladies, of which they have exclusive control”, wrote William Carey Jones in 1895 (Clemens, 104).



*Stiles Hall, home for the Berkeley YWCA from 1892 - 1918 and Fall of 1919 (Clemens, 104)*

Next, the YWCA occupied “The Cottage”, designed by Julia Morgan, a civil engineering alumna who graduated from UC Berkeley in the Class of 1894 and was the architect for numerous YWCAs throughout the West (Ladies Blue and Gold, 13). The Cottage was home to

the Berkeley YWCA from 1920 - 1958. It was located at the corner of Allston Way and Union Street, which was adjacent to but not part of the UC Berkeley campus.



*“The Cottage” designed by Julia Morgan (Clements, 108)*



*Women students of the 1940s display the Community Chest red feather flag on the steps of The Cottage (Ladies Blue And Gold, 17.*

Beyond providing the meeting rooms for women in Berkeley for Bible study and missionary concerns, the Berkeley YWCA also helped female students at UC Berkeley adapt to

the college environment *by extending the warmth and richness of the YWCA experience*. The gender ratio in Berkeley was imbalanced in the early days: in 1889, there were only forty-three women students in total at UC Berkeley (Ladies Blue and Gold, 11). Beginning in 1889, Berkeley welcomed women students to campus by giving a reception. In fact, the YWCA joined the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) classmates to host new students' receptions but claimed that the YWCA is "independent of the YMCA in all matters of administration" (Ladies Blue And Gold, 12). Each association also hosted separate welcoming events for new students in Berkeley.

In the early 1930s, the YWCA continued offering a variety of student services to welcome freshmen women at UC Berkeley, including freshman breakfasts, mailing 1,500 program brochures about the Berkeley YWCA, hosting two-day open houses, and organizing day-long rallies (Ladies Blue And Gold, 13). These activities not only helped freshmen women at UC Berkeley feel a sense of belonging but also enabled the Berkeley YWCA to create programs to strengthen the YWCA Bible study community. "The girls elected their own officers and assisted in planning their meetings. Each commission was, in effect, a well-organized YWCA mini-group" (Ladies Blue And Gold, 13).

During World War II, the national YWCA proactively helped Japanese Americans with their wellbeing during the ignominious history of the internment, and assisted families to prepare for traveling to the internment camps (Park, 502). On the national level, the YWCA led other social work organizations to coordinate and offer important services to Japanese Americans who were scattered across the nation post-incarceration. The national YWCA was unique among all the voluntary organizations in dedicating full-time paid workers to establish and fund programs within the internment camps and "used its network of influential members to lobby and advocate

for policies and legislation” (Park, 478). By actively supporting Japanese American students in federal relocation camps during WWII, the national YWCA proved to be courageous, vocal, proactive, and consistent about its effort to achieve racial equality (Park, 477). Complementing the national YWCA’s hard work on behalf of Japanese internees, the Berkeley YWCA also effectively helped these Japanese American students find student lodging. In fact, during WWII, the Berkeley YWCA was “one of the most popular outlets for [female students at Berkeley’s] political engagement” because it held progressive positions on the nation's central social, political, and economic issues of the day. Women in Berkeley furthered their activist causes at the YWCA during the war years (Dorn, 534-5).

The Berkeley YWCA advocated for their right to apply to student housing and formed the Berkeley Student Relocation Council to assist directly with their relocation. The Berkeley YWCA negotiated with the Associated Students University of California (ASUC) to assist Japanese American students to have equal opportunities in seeking student housing. In 1941, the Berkeley YWCA convinced the ASUC to “endorse a resolution opposing racist and religious discrimination in student housing” in order to eliminate racism and help open lodging in boarding houses to minorities (Dorn, 557). In 1942, the Berkeley YWCA formed a Student Relocation Council in order to help relocate Berkeley's Japanese American students to colleges and universities outside of the restricted coastal area. First, the Berkeley Student Relocation Council immediately relocated 75 students (Dorn, 558). Then, after six months, the YWCA was also able to help 81 more Berkeley students to relocate from internment camps to universities. By the end of 1944, the Berkeley YWCA was preparing to help the internees in anticipation of their return to Berkeley. Members of the Berkeley YWCA “renovated a building for Japanese

American students and their parents to use as a hostel and sent representatives to the internment camp in Topaz, UT” (Dorn, 558).

In summary, the Berkeley YWCA played a significant role in supporting about 500 Japanese American students at Berkeley in federal relocation camps (Kell, 1). Their advocacy helped the Japanese American students in Berkeley to stay safely in the relocation campuses.

**Interview with a Former Executive Director  
of the Berkeley YWCA, Sharon Bettinelli**

Sharon Bettinelli served as Executive Director of the Berkeley YWCA from 1984 until her retirement in 2017. From 2018 - 2021, she served a three-year term as a member of the Board of Directors. In an interview, Bettinelli discussed the continuing history of the YWCA and how it has supported women at UC Berkeley.

In 1908, the YWCA and the YMCA in Berkeley started meeting together because of students’ initiatives. The YWCA grew quickly in the 1900s with help from the national YWCA and collaboration with the YMCA. *While the YWCA began as a religious group, its members became more and more involved in what was going on in the world, expanding the YWCA beyond a Bible study group.*

The Berkeley YWCA has addressed critical issues about which most women were silent in the 1900s: racism and women’s right to choose. Because the Berkeley YWCA is not part of the campus, the YWCA has been freer to be outspoken, and more able to act efficiently with fewer layers of campus administration. For example, in the 1960s, the YWCA welcomed Planned Parenthood into the YWCA building to advise women about birth control. This was a significant step in advocating for women’s rights. No other student organization on campus was

able to do so. “The YWCA has been there for women to reach out and take risks to empower them,” Ms. Bettinelli recalled. In fact, the Berkeley YWCA never aimed to be part of the campus but to work directly with young women to cultivate their leadership and development.



*Sketch of the new Berkeley YWCA building that was dedicated in March 1959, at the corner of Bancroft Way and Bowditch Street in Berkeley (Clements, 113)*

The YWCA has maintained a close relationship with the campus community while acting independently. Berkeley students are engaged in the YWCA programs, and many board members are professors or staff members on campus. For example, the wives of most Chancellors became members of the Berkeley YWCA Board of Directors, reinforcing strong connections between the YWCA and the UC campus. The YWCA mission statement is to eliminate racism, empower women, develop leaders, and promote peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all. Functioning with fewer layers of bureaucracy and more freedom as an independent organization, with the continuing involvement of UC Berkeley female students, faculty and staff, and board of directors, the YWCA successfully helps women in Berkeley

understand racism, develop the next generation of female leaders, and advocate for women's rights in Berkeley and the larger community.

### **Interview with a long-term Berkeley YWCA Board Member, Kate Earle Funk**

On a visit to the Berkeley YWCA office, I learned the beautiful history of the Berkeley YWCA from a long-term board member, Kate Earle Funk. At the Berkeley YWCA, “most programs are run by students, as part of the goal to develop leaders with the support of staff”, Ms. Funk said.

Many students are running various programs, volunteering, or doing work-study at the Berkeley YWCA. For example, the Student Leadership Board program is a student-led council of organized community engagement, which aligns with the YWCA's mission. The TechGyrls program at the YWCA matches elementary school girls with mentors and introduces them to hands-on science and technology concepts. Similarly, the Girls Group Mentoring Program helps local middle school students in Berkeley and Oakland by linking them to current UC Berkeley students as mentors. The English in Action program offers non-native English speakers at UC Berkeley the opportunity to practice English with volunteers. Through these programs, the Berkeley YWCA provides women at UC Berkeley the opportunity to “lead, advocate, and run programs” with the help of staff members, Ms. Funk reported. She also suggests that these programs have left a long-lasting impact on the local community thanks to student volunteers and staff who share the same commitment to eliminate racism and empower women.

The YWCA board members highly value student involvement at the YWCA. Ms. Funk reports that at the monthly board meetings, student volunteers are invited to participate, present updates, and share experiences from their programmatic involvement at the Berkeley YWCA.



Students are also asked to say a few words about themselves -- where they are from, their major field of study, plans for graduate school, or whatever their future aspirations.

### **Interview with the current Executive Director of the Berkeley YWCA, Jenny DeRuntz**

Jenny DeRuntz, the current Executive Director of the Berkeley YWCA, who was the assistant director for 15 years, shared her insights about how different programs at the YWCA have supported women in efforts to eliminate racism and promote justice. Ms. DeRuntz explained why she has been so passionate about the work in the YWCA over the past two decades. She shared her insights about the impact of the YWCA on students: “the mission is pretty grand and that keeps you going,” and “being around the student population and seeing students keep on steering the YWCA to relevant work.” Being driven by very passionate students makes it very easy to stick around. Further, the Berkeley YWCA has always connected students with opportunities to give back to the community through volunteering and has offered students leadership opportunities they might not otherwise enjoy.

Ms. DeRuntz highlighted the Y’s *Young Women Financial Literacy Program*. “Financial literacy and empowerment are intertwined with racial justice,” which aligns with the Berkeley YWCA goals. This program focuses on helping women in their teens, 20s, and 30s to learn about financial independence and money management. Every year, the YWCA hosts conferences on this topic in Oakland that draw a diverse set of speakers and audiences. “Speakers include women of color who are experts in the financial sphere,” and these conferences aim to help women “understand the bigger picture of economic advancement and the larger financial structure in the nation, so they can make a change,” Ms. DeRuntz stated. The Young Women Financial Literacy Program empowers women to achieve financial resilience and independence.

## **Conclusion**

I have briefly summarized the history of the Berkeley YWCA since its inception to the present and have described a few of the current programs and initiatives of the Berkeley YWCA, which focus on racism and the empowerment of women. Since 1889, starting as a Christian Bible study group, the Y quickly grew into a progressive women's student organization, making a positive impact on women at UC Berkeley and the larger Berkeley and Oakland communities.

The Berkeley YWCA interviewees offered examples of programs that address issues that are relevant to the present. Ms. Sharon Bettinelli, the executive director of the Berkeley YWCA from 1984 - 2017, pointed out the pioneering role of the Berkeley YWCA during the 1960s in sponsoring planned parenthood and supporting women in Berkeley with birth control. Ms. Kate Earle Funk, a long-term board member at the Berkeley YWCA, stated that many programs at the Berkeley YWCA, such as the TechGyrls program and the Girls Group Mentoring Program, are run by students. These initiatives aim to continuously impact women at UC Berkeley and the Berkeley and Oakland communities. Student involvement is highly valued by the Berkeley YWCA board. The current executive director at the Berkeley YWCA, Jenny DeRuntz, explained the impact of the Young Women Financial Literacy Program. Moreover, the Berkeley YWCA has provided leadership and work-study opportunities for UC Berkeley students to work towards the mission of eliminating racism and empowering women.

The Berkeley YWCA has supported and empowered women students in Berkeley over the past 132 years and advocated for racial and social justice for all people. The Berkeley YWCA's work and mission are very relevant to the current period of our history to eliminate racism in light of the Black Lives Matter movement. The COVID-19 pandemic has also

exacerbated existing gender inequalities, including more domestic violence against girls and women during shelter-in-place, a larger gender pay gap, and higher unemployment rates of women (UN Foundation, 1). I believe that the initiatives of the Berkeley YWCA, which support women in Berkeley and serve the larger Berkeley and Oakland communities, are crucial to empower girls and women during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

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