

YWCA: a century

By NICOLE STRAHAN

IT assisted women seeking financial independence in the early 1900s; later on, to enrol in sex education classes that caused public outrage; and, more recently, sold bricks to fund a rest room for the first female soccer club.

With achievements such as these, it is easy to see why YWCA employee Kylie Emonson is proud to work for the organisation.

Kylie is the office and program co-ordinator for the Bendigo YWCA and has been researching the history of the association to mark its centenary, and came across a swag of accounts that reveal the strength and determination of her YWCA forebears.

"It's about women for women; women helping women . . . but it's also about leading," she said.

"It makes you really proud to be a woman."

The first meeting place for the Bendigo YWCA was at number six, Medic Terrace, which is now the Coles car park in Myers Street.

Members of the group, which first met on May 25, 1906, planned to continue the YWCA's objectives of "spiritual, social and intellectual edification for young girls".

The rooms were furnished for letter writing, meeting other young women and as an employment bureau for girls.

Educational classes including Bible study, shorthand, dressmaking and millinery sessions were also held.

The organisation later operated out of a member's residence, in Forest Street, before moving to Mitchell Street and then a second floor space in View Street.

When the ground floor was vacant, the YWCA leased the room and the site became the first cafeteria run by the Bendigo YWCA.

The cafeteria offered a safe and sheltered place for girls who could not return home from work for their midday meal, and raised revenue for the organisation.

Women could take their own lunches, or buy a two-course meal for one shilling (about 10 cents).

In 1915, the YWCA moved to a store in Hargreaves Street, where it remained until the opening of the first Bendigo YWCA hostel, the former Black Swan hotel in Howard Place.

The hostel offered 12 rooms for boarders, mostly employed young females or students who lived in regional areas.

It also offered a safe place for travellers requiring an inexpensive



Kylie Emonson has been researching the YWCA archives and memorabilia.

Picture: BRENDAN MCCARTHY

place to stay while visiting an unfamiliar city.

According to Kylie, the founders of the YWCA "realised they had to be independent" and that led to the development of hostels and hotels around the globe.

The commercial aspect supported the community services offered by the association.

"It was about financial independence, it was visionary and it developed independence," Kylie said.

The hostel outgrew its home and was relocated to the former home for the blind in Inglewood Road in 1958.

The hostel closed in 1960, and in 1961, the association bought the building on the corner of High and

of achievements



Norma Cook sifts through old clippings and photos.

Picture: LAURA SCOTT

Short street, which was used as a youth centre until 1981.

The YWCA then operated from 465 Hargreaves Street, and 90 Vine Street, now Girton Grammar School, before moving to the purpose-built premises in Townsend Street, in 1993.

The Young Women's Christian Association is a global network of women advancing social justice and creating opportunities and services for the development of women and their families.

Programs and services vary according to the needs of the women in the community.

While the organisation was

initially based on a Christian faith, it does not discriminate.

One of the greatest challenges faced by the YWCA in its early years was to show that it was not a religious sect.

According to the *Bendigo Advertiser* of June, 1927, the purpose of the YWCA included encouragement of fellowship in the Christian Church.

A YWCA column in the paper also stated that a "woman is not excluded from the association because of her religious beliefs or lack of them".

The YWCA set the agenda for women's issues in many instances,

including sport, sex education and finances.

"Our history lies in the fact that we gave opportunities for young women that socially at that time was almost not the done thing," Kylie said.

Such opportunities included the establishment of Bendigo's first women's hockey and basketball teams, and the development of the Garden Gully sports precinct for young women.

The women sold bricks to fund a rest room at the site.

The association has formed support groups for young businesswomen, married women, young mothers and has worked with migrants and refugees, on training, first aid and self-defence.

Theatre, singing and fitness group have also played a large part in the association's history, along with playgroups and school holiday programs.

A thrift club started during World War I to assist girls to save their wages. The club encouraged young women to save small amounts each week, which was then banked in their name.

In 1925, the YWCA established a series of five sex education lectures, which was "unheard of in its time and very forward thinking, but typical of the work of the YWCA."

"We ran courses that publicly were storms, but the YWCA saw it as essentially important that women understood how their body worked," Kylie said.

"When I look at the history of our

rich past, most things coincide with what's happening today.

Kylie believes in carrying on the YWCA's empowering ethos.

"If women need sex education, let's offer them sex education.

"If there is a need for a support group for young mothers, let's do that.

"There are no limits for women out there."

Kylie pointed out that YWCA Victoria is a key social justice group; and its mission and strategic framework focuses on support for marginalised and disadvantaged young women in our community.

Norma Cook is one of many to have been involved with YWCA and believes it has played a key role in women's progress through the decades.

"The Y has fulfilled a major

function for women in terms of equal opportunity and fitting them into society," she said.

"I felt it was fulfilling a real purpose and it had a very real place."

The Bendigo YWCA will mark its centenary with a permanent sculpture, *In The Bag*, at its Townsend Street entrance.

It will be a series of handbags each celebrating a decade in YWCA history.

According to Kylie, the "project will be deeply grounded in place, telling a specifically Bendigo story" and will symbolise women's different experiences that include war, the workplace and sport.

The YWCA Bendigo week-long centenary celebrations run from May 22 to May 26. In The Bag launch is from noon to 3 pm, on Thursday, May 23.

Programs offered by the Bendigo YWCA:

The Bendigo School Holiday Program — a welcoming and safe environment for primary school children.

Girlstorey — a Community Arts program that supports young women to reflect on their experiences through creative processes and collaborative projects.

Baby Dolls — a program for young mums by young mums up to 25 years of age to inspire them to maintain their own social connections and assist other young mothers.

Self Protection — assisting young women to develop skills in self protection.

Bendigo Young Women's Network — a new initiative bringing together a range of service providers.

Encore — an exercise program for women who have experienced mastectomy, lumpectomy or breast reconstruction surgery.

YWCA Week Without Violence, October 9-15 — a worldwide initiative designed to highlight and combat violence against women.