



Dubuque Community Y remains true to mission for 150 years

Timeline

1844 – The first YMCA is founded in London, England

1855 – America's first YMCA is established in Boston

1858 – The YWCA is founded in America.

1866 – On Sep. 11, the Dubuque YMCA is founded at 130 N. Main St. The location later relocated to 679 N. Main St.

1894 – H.L. Stout donates his house at Ninth and Iowa streets for the YMCA's headquarters. It is renovated and, by 1895, features residence rooms, a gymnasium and an auditorium.

1902 – The Dubuque YWCA is founded.

1904 – The YMCA establishes a swimming school on the banks of the Mississippi River at the base of Third Street.

1909 – The YWCA moves into a building at Sixth and Locust streets.

1916 – The H.L. Stout house is demolished and replaced by a new building used for YMCA offices, locker rooms, residence rooms, a swimming pool, weightlifting room, handball court and health center.

1932 – The YWCA relocates to 11th and Iowa streets.

1951 – The YMCA opens a camp at what used to be Union Park. The camp originally was owned in cooperation with the Boy Scouts. Now, it is owned solely by the YMCA.

1966 – The YMCA and YWCA begin a partnership to build a new facility, which would be shared between the two organizations.

1970 – The YMCA and YWCA open their current facility at 35 N. Booth St. Programming begins in December.

2000 – The YMCA and YWCA merge and become the Dubuque Community Y. There are only three other merged YMCA/YWCAs in America, one of which is in Marshalltown, Iowa.

Sources: Keith Ahlvin, property manager at Dubuque Community Y; "Dubuque: The Encyclopedia" and TH archives

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The Dubuque Community Y has been a part of Eileen Putchio's life for decades.

"I've been coming since I was 8 years old, actually," she said. "Tons of us kids that went when we were young still come now."

Putchio and a group of friends head to the Y every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning to work out and take water aerobics classes together.

"We'll use the machines upstairs, as well as swimming in the pool," she said. "But laughter is the best medicine. That's how we really look so good."

Karen McClain visits the Y each week with Putchio. She said everyone involved with the organization — whether it be staff or members — cares deeply for each other.

"We're just a big group of friends," she said. "There's always people bringing things: fruits and vegetables from the gardens, and sometimes cake and cookies when it's a birthday or we want to celebrate. And then we'll all sign cards at the front desk and work it all off in the pool later."

The Dubuque YMCA was established in September 1866 — 11 years after the first American YMCA was founded in Boston, 22 years after the original YMCA was founded in London and 150 years ago this month. Through a century and a half, the local organization has changed and adapted to serve residents of the Dubuque area. It's an evolution that Y leaders acknowledge will continue in the coming years, particularly as the organization looks at a new facility to replace its longtime structure on North Booth Street.

"When we talk about an organization that was here 150 years ago that was important and relevant enough to start then and is still relevant today, that's huge," said Y Board Member Emily McCready. "I think there's a lot to be said about an organization that has to keep reinventing itself but can stay true to itself and its mission. We don't just change for ourselves; we're responding to the community."

STORIED HISTORY

Throughout cultural shifts, wars and social movements, both the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) have been part of the Dubuque community for more than a century. According to Dubuque Community Y President and CEO Sharon Covey, the organizations have histories as rich as the area they helped build.

"When we talk about history, the organization tries to stay nimble to what's happening," she said. "As there's cultural differences and cultural changes throughout history, the Y tends to shift to meet some of those needs." The Dubuque YMCA's beginnings were modest. The first headquarters was located above a drug store at 130 N. Main St.

In 1894, wealthy businessman H.L. Stout donated his house at Ninth and Iowa streets to the organization. By the following year, the building was equipped with residence rooms, a gymnasium and an auditorium.

To learn more about the organization's past, Y Property Manager Keith Ahlvin has worked to preserve every document, photograph and note he can find.

"We always had archives, but they were in plastic tubs getting eaten by mice," he said.

The organization applied for and this summer received a \$920 grant from the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs to aid in the preservation and archiving of those documents.

Y officials have worked with Loras College's Center for Dubuque History, where staff members have learned how to maintain historical documents, as well as how to make them available to the public in the future.

"For people looking at (the YMCA's history), for genealogy and Dubuque history, it's sort of neat to see how Dubuque reacted to national and larger issues in history," Ahlvin said. "It's always sort of followed the culture in the U.S. You can go back in the '50s and find notes on the teen programs. ... You can follow it through racial issues in the '70s and '60s, little responses to Vietnam when they were handling that."

THE PATH TO ONE Y

In 1902, the Dubuque YWCA was established. Nearly 300 women joined initially, participating in programs such as sewing, arithmetic, German and Bible study.

"The YWCA was much better at keeping records than the men were," Ahlvin noted, with a laugh.

Since then, both the YMCA and YWCA have changed locations multiple times due to increased membership and outdated facilities. The YMCA also opened a camp at Union Park in 1951 — the land was first donated to both the YMCA and area Boy Scouts.

In 1966, the Dubuque YMCA and YWCA partnered to build a new facility at 35 N. Booth St., which opened in 1970. Thirty years later, the two organizations merged to form the Dubuque Community Y.

"It's both a blessing and a challenge because we're following two totally separate, very different missions," Covey said.

There are only three other combined YMCA/YWCA organizations in the U.S. Y officials see the arrangement as an opportunity.

"I think we have a great opportunity in the fact that we serve two national organizations," said Sandy Gonzales-Denham, senior director for mission advancement. "Because of that, we're able to provide the community with services for everyone."

According to Director of Member Engagement Dustin Schulz, the Dubuque Community Y serves about 10,000 members per year, a number that has gone up by about 2,000 over the last two years. About 6,000 of those are active members who regularly participate in programs or use the Y's facilities.

"We do wellness fairs. We work with a lot of corporate partners, as well, and we bring them in because it's an opportunity to get their companies healthier and they get more productive work out of it," Schulz said.

Each year, the Dubuque Community Y also is served by more than 1,000 volunteers and employees. John Meyer, 65, started working at the Y in 1967 as a junior in high school.

"I worked there through the last two years of high school and then for four years while I was at Loras (College), part time," he said. "I was in the pool the whole time, lifeguarding and teaching, and at Y camp during the summers. When I graduated, I worked about five and a half years as the aquatics director at the new building." Meyer took a short break from the Y after serving as aquatics director but returned in 1980 as a maintenance employee. He retired last September after 47 years with the organization.

"(The Y) was hopping," he said. "It's (served) boys, girls, men and women. ... It's more than the gym and the pool."

THE COMMUNITY'S Y

Nationally, each YMCA and YWCA focuses on promoting a set of "pillars" laid out by the organizations. The YMCA's pillars, or what the organization stands for, include youth development, healthy living and social responsibility. The YWCA focuses on eliminating racism and empowering women.

Because the Dubuque Community Y is a merging of both organizations, it focuses on all five pillars.

"When we operate our programs, we don't say, 'This is a YMCA program,' or 'Let's focus on our YWCA pillars.' We see our job as carrying all five pillars at all times," Gonzales-Denham said.

In focusing on those pillars, the Y has developed several programs that have become popular throughout the years.

"I would like to highlight our swimming lessons," Covey said. "We live in a river community, and (water safety) is really important. One of our goals with our aquatics director is making sure every child has the opportunity to learn to at least be safe around water and swim."

The local organization also implemented special programs related to each pillar, some of which can be found at YMCAs and YWCAs across the country.

"The new Diabetes Prevention Plan is a 'Y Signature Program' reflecting (healthy living). Pre-diabetes is something that affects millions of Americans, and that's something that here, locally, we can impact," Gonzales-Denham said. "We've reached out to the hospitals and clinics in the community to provide this service to the community in the hopes that we can bring awareness to this disease and help prevent tri-state residents from becoming diabetic by providing education, resources and the empowerment to make lifestyle changes."

On top of the organization's outreach programs and swimming lessons, it also operates a victim services shelter and offers fitness classes and child care.

"It's a hub to the community, whether you're a child, adult or a senior citizen," said McCready, who grew up in Dubuque and attended Y classes as a child. "There's so much to offer there."

That's what Covey and staff members work so hard to communicate to the tri-states — it's so much more than a "swim-and-gym."

"People will say, 'Well, what makes you different than the gym down the street?'" Covey said. "Something that I think sets us apart is that we create social spaces, and we create social groups. That's part of what keeps people connected to a healthy lifestyle. They're not coming just to get a 45-minute workout. ... And we turn nobody away."

CHARTING THE FUTURE

While the Dubuque Community Y has utilized its building at Booth Street since 1970, staff members agree the organization has outgrown the facility.

"It was designed and built perfectly for what the needs were in 1969, and the organization has changed and we've had four major additions since then," Ahlvin said. "As a result of that, it's become a very stretched out and oddly shaped building. It's not very flexible, and as you move into new facilities, flexibility is key. ... We want to be able to adapt and change with whatever 25 years from now looks like."

Covey referenced the lack of office space at the current location — it is "maxed out" right now — as well as lack of room for programs for members to use.

"Some of our summer programs for our kiddos (are held) in our racquetball court. We've had women doing yoga in the kitchen service area," she said. "So when we've grown in members over the last couple of years, you can imagine how that stretches the building."

Meanwhile, the Y's West End facility was shuttered this summer after being open for a little more than two years. Officials framed the closure as part of a broader strategic plan that includes a new main site.

To remedy the space problem, the Dubuque Community Y is looking at doing what it's done many times before — finding a new facility. According to Covey, this project is still in the planning phase.

"We're looking to build (a new facility). The other option of purchasing a building isn't off the table, but we're leaning towards the build, definitely," she said. "Hopefully, our market research (results) will come back and say, 'Yes,' (to) where we'd like to be, what we'd like to look like. Then, after that, we'll do a feasibility study ... and that feasibility study will tell us if we can (raise enough money for the project)."

Covey anticipates the Y will be able to move forward with its plans, and if it does, the current building will remain open until the new facility is complete.

"No, we wouldn't close during construction," Covey said.

Whatever the future holds for the Dubuque Community Y, Gonzales-Denham anticipates it will be anything but "business as usual."

"Without a doubt, our team is laser-focused on impact and how we can best serve our community," she said.

Keith Ahlvin is married to Megan Gloss, TH features editor.

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