

AAUW-Rockford: The first 10 years

MY VIEW

The year was 1929. Less than 10 years earlier, American women had been given the right to vote with the signing of the 19th Amendment. For almost 50 years, the American Association of University Women and the two organizations that originally joined together to create AAUW had been working to shed misconceptions that education was harmful to a woman's health and to support women's access to higher education and equal pay for women in the workplace.

In Rockford, a group of Rockford College faculty and graduates decided to form a branch of AAUW, meeting with a group of about 80 local women at the Nelson Hotel in downtown Rockford.

The branch was formally organized in 1930, when, as one member recounted years later, it was an "unpropitious time" to be starting a new organization for women. 1930 was "a bleak year; economic depression loomed over us and war clouds from Germany were beginning to show on the horizon."

Although many of the women who gathered for that first meeting at the Nelson Hotel had attended college at schools across the country, the core group were affiliated with Rockford College (now Rockford University). Among the 10 charter members of the Rockford branch were four Rockford College professors and two students. In the first 25 years of the branch, four branch presidents were college faculty, so well after the branch founding, the connection between AAUW and Rockford College remained strong.

One of those charter members who then went on to be branch president and Illinois state president of AAUW was Mildred Berry. A Rockford College professor, speech therapist, and advocate for children and for the advancement of women, Berry later co-founded Rockford Network, an organization that promoted the upward mobility of women in the professions and in public life and was a life member of the League of Women Voters. The Rosecrance Berry Campus located in east Rockford was named in her honor.

Berry believed that AAUW had a "particular responsibility" in the Rockford community "by providing," as she said, "a culture climate in which respect for the trained mind is fostered, in which truth, and freedom to seek and express the truth occupy a first, and not a second place in community thought."

AAUW-Rockford took on a significant role in helping to support community education not only through support of the local schools and raising money for college scholarships to local students, but also in organizing open community meeting on issues and topics of interest to the general public.

Community presentations were on a wide range of topics, from disarmament and consumer problems to vocations for women and the federal government's role in flood control. The group also sponsored presentations by artist Lorado Taft, who created the Chief Blackhawk Statue in Oregon, and by the Superintendent of the State Reformatory for Women who spoke on "The Problem of the Woman Offender."

Community collaborations were also an important goal for the women of AAUW. During the 1930s, the Rockford branch often collaborated with other women's organizations, including the YWCA and the League of Women Voters. In 1939, the three organizations cosponsored a series of classes on International Relations. During the 1930s, AAUW also worked with the Business and Professional Woman's Club and the Teachers' Club in Rockford to sponsor a Community Lecture series.

Like the national organization, the local AAUW branch raised money for college scholarships for women. Not long before the Rockford branch was established, the national AAUW organization made a commitment to raise a \$1 million endowment to be used for higher education for women because funding for women's education was not as highly valued as education for men. AAUW-Rockford awarded scholarships to young women pursuing their college degrees, oftentimes at Rockford College.

To support scholarships, pay speakers, and fund classes sponsored by the group, AAUW members raised money by selling magazine subscriptions, theater tickets, toothbrushes, pictorial maps, calendars, stationary, placemats and used books. In 1932, the branch suffered a setback when funds were lost when a bank failed.

By 1939, AAUW-Rockford had 234 members. Despite the difficulties of the Depression years, through the persistence and dedication of its members, AAUW was well established in the Rockford community and well positioned for the challenges for women's education in the 1940s. *Mary Weaks-Baxter is a member of AAUW-Rockford and Andrew Sherratt Professor at Rockford University where she teaches English and is faculty coordinator of the Community-Based Learning program. AAUW-Rockford Branch is celebrating its 90th anniversary in 2019. It is a nonpartisan organization open to both women and men with at least a two-year college degree. For more information, visit [https:// rockfordarea-il.aauw.net](https://rockfordarea-il.aauw.net).*



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