

In 1950s, AAUW-Rockford focused on education and more

Though the decade of the 1950s evokes memories of happy homemakers and beautiful lawns, women were going through changes in education, world politics and their own status. The Rockford Branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) was at the forefront of these changes.

Even before 1952, AAUW was concerned that institutions of higher learning provide equity for male and female faculty. Among other things, the schools needed to properly recognize women faculty and staff members and not favor male faculty for professorships and key positions, and the college needed true academic freedom. Nearly 70 years ago, AAUW expected the same standards that we expect today.

Despite the fact that AAUW kept a watchful eye on promoting equality in all areas, those standards did not mention equal pay. That was not a law until the Equal Pay Act of 1963 passed. However, during the 1950s, AAUW educated its members and the public through panel discussions and lectures on that topic.

AAUW offered several study groups to members, one focused on education. A committee was formed in 1953 to urge Rockford Mayor C. Henry Bloom to appoint a woman to the Rockford School Board. In 1958, the committee made a survey on the

subjects of teacher salaries and shortages, percentage of high school graduates going to college, and opportunities for gifted children.

A relatively new tool, educational television, was studied also. Leaders of the Rockford Education Association spoke frequently with the Rockford branch, discussing some of those pressing issues. Today, we seek to solve these same education issues.

The number of girls who entered college dropped during the 1950s, and many left college early to marry. Believing that education was one of the keys to a fulfilling life, the Rockford branch awarded yearly scholarships to Rockford College (now Rockford University) to female graduates of Rockford public high schools. The branch also gave scholarships to women studying at Rockford College from other nations such as India and Turkey, and contributed to the national AAUW fellowship fund.

Mildred Berry, a charter member of the Rockford branch, wanted to ensure that we enriched the cultural climate and offerings to the community. Uplifted by scholarly programs, we had noteworthy speakers on a variety of timely subjects.

International Relations was the focus of another important study group during the 1950s. World War II was fresh in everyone's mind, and people were hopeful that there

would be no more oppression and destruction ever again.

A speaker from the American Foreign Policy Association sought to bring information from throughout the world to each community, and in doing so, kept everyone abreast of possible threats to peace. Crusade for Freedom was a campaign that encouraged people in Iron Curtain countries to keep fighting for freedom. The Rockford branch circulated petitions offering moral support and monetary donations to Radio Free Europe to help in that fight.

Women of color faced all of the restrictions and limitations imposed on white women with the addition of those faced by racial minorities. In 1951, the social studies committee of the Rockford branch engaged in research about equal employment opportunities for African Americans. Members spoke with the mayor, interviewed ministers, and wrote newspaper articles about inequalities faced by minorities in an effort to raise community awareness.

The foundation laid by AAUW before and throughout the 1950s paved the way for the actions of the turbulent 1960s. *Joan Tunnell is a member of AAUW. AAUW-Rockford Branch is celebrating its 90th anniversary in 2019. It is a nonpartisan organization and open to both women and men with at least a two-year college degree. For more information, visit rockfordarea-il.aauw.net*