

Their View: 90 years of AAUW looking at the world, working in Rockford

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In the 1960s, the American Association of University Women-Rockford Branch was focused on international affairs and in local education.

Topics of branch study groups were the Far East, Vietnam, the Middle East, the Soviet Union, Cuba and Fidel Castro and communism and the Peace Corps. During the latter 60s, members studied the revolution happening in China.

Locally, the branch supported the beginnings of the Rockford Education Association and monitored the election in which they formed a union. In 1965, the branch started an inner city kindergarten class of 25 for an eight-week session and later operated four centers of Head Start with 30 children in each. At this time, only private kindergartens served the population. The branch also supported the Welsh School Teacher Training Center and created a booklet called "ABC's of Government" which was sold to area school systems as an aid to civics classes. In 1966, the branch started a fund to support women going to graduate school as there was a shortage of teachers in higher education.

The Branch Forum series included speeches by Sen. Paul Douglas, Lt. Gov. Paul Simon and Rep. John B. Anderson. Betty Friedan, author of "The Feminine Mystique," came to talk about "The Crisis in Women's Identity." One lecture at an AAUW "Think-In" was called "Women's Organizations — Treadmills or Escalators." Marcella Harris, the first African American woman to be appointed to the Rockford Board of Education, gave an address titled "The Impact of Women on Contemporary Society." She asked, as women moved more into careers, " ... who will transmit the values of morality and culture to the next generation?" This was a time of women striving for more education and better careers.

In 1962, Dr. Mildred Berry retired after 32 years of teaching at Rockford College (now Rockford University) but was a frequent moderator of panels such as “Rockford Tomorrow” that examined the health of the city of Rockford and its citizens. The branch hosted the state AAUW convention at the Faust Hotel in 1963.

Women came together to study art history, architecture, creative writing, painting, investing and money management. There were lectures about radio isotopes, cancer research and the effects of the opening of the Chrysler plant in Belvidere. There were evening and daytime literature groups including Book Beat which began in 1967 and is still meeting today.

The decade ended with a theme of “Campaign of Conscience” which examined the growing gap between the rich and poor in the community, the lack of low-cost housing in Rockford, the politics of public education and desegregation. The branch supported the West End Community Organization locally and the Coretta Scott King National Fund for scholarships for “those overlooked or neglected by society.”

Mary S. Johnson is past president; Barbara Simon, co-president

More information: 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 <https://rockfordarea-il.aauw.net>.