

# *Meet Me at the Y...*



PHYLLIS WHEATLEY YWCA, INC. - A 501(C)(3) ORGANIZATION  
WWW.PWYWCA.ORG 202-667-9100  
CFC #31203 DC One Fund #9033

*Meet Me at the Y...*

The Board of Directors of the  
Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association, Inc.

The mission of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA (PWYWCA) is "to provide affordable housing and programs to women regardless of race, creed, or color. We serve women in transition to prevent homelessness. We also provide outreach services to children in the community. Phyllis Wheatley YWCA operates as an independent living facility.

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November, 2016

Friends of Phyllis Wheatley YWCA,

In June of 2016, the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA (PWYWCA) Board of Directors received a grant from the DC Community Heritage Project (DCCHP). As a DCCHP grantee we were able to begin an oral history project to highlight the work PWYWCA has done over the years in the Shaw community. Our project *Meet Me At The Y...* is a compilation of narratives that tell a portion of the PWYWCA story.

We know that PWYWCA's reach has been expansive since our inception in 1905. Our oral history project provided an opportunity for 12 narrators to tell their stories about what PWYWCA has meant to them. Over the years, PWYWCA has worked diligently to provide housing that is hospitable and supportive for our residents; the oral history project allowed women who found PWYWCA to be such a place to tell their stories. Our narratives include the memories of a former employee who worked with PWYWCA in the 1960's; as well as insights from former and current Board members serving from the late 1950's to today. The Shaw community has been home to PWYWCA since 1920, over the years, we have maintained meaningful relationships with our community partners, Shiloh Baptist Church and the Association for the Study of African Life and History; their stories have also been shared.

On behalf of the Board and our Executive Director, I sincerely thank everyone who worked hard to make *Meet Me at the Y*... a successful project.

Sincerely,

*Patricia L. Plummer*

Patricia L. Plummer



Project Leaders: Patricia L. Plummer, President; Dr. Judith A. Webb, Historian; and, Paulette C. Holloway, Executive Director.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**YWCA OF THE NATIONAL CAPITAL AREA**

**THIS PROJECT WAS UNDERWRITTEN BY A DC COMMUNITY HERITAGE PROJECT (DCCHP) GRANT FROM HUMANITIES DC AND THE DC OFFICE OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION.**

## HISTORY OF THE PHYLLIS WHEATLEY YOUNG WOMEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION, INC.

The idea for a YWCA began with Mrs. Rosetta Lawson's, a churchwoman and social activist, encounter with a YWCA organizer in Chicago. Upon her return, she invited her literary group, "The Booklovers Club," to consider organizing a YWCA in the Washington, DC. The invitation was extended on April 5, 1905, at the Berean Baptist Church and the first YWCA in Washington was organized on May 5, 1905. The first home was two rented rooms at 4½ Street and Maryland Avenue, SW. Around 1910 the association purchased a ten-room residence at 429 T Street, NW, to provide care, housing, and guidance to the hundreds of "Colored" women and girls flocking to the city to seek employment. The initial concern, as it is today, was safe, affordable housing for women and programs for women and children.

The first President was Mrs. Bettie Francis. Mrs. Julia West Hamilton was the third and longest serving President. In 1918, the "Colored" YWCA became affiliated with the National Board<sup>1</sup> of the Young Women's Christian Association of the United States of America. The D.C. Central YWCA chose to remain separate from the "Colored" YWCA.

On the corner of Ninth and Rhode Island Avenue, NW, stands a four-story building of eclectic architecture and gracious looks. The building, named a National Historical Landmark in 1983, was dedicated December 19, 1920, as one of the first "Colored" YWCAs in the United States of America. In 1923, the organization was incorporated as the *Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association, Inc.*<sup>2</sup> The 901 building was financed by the

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Wheatley YWCA is not currently affiliated with the National Capital Area YWCA or National YWCA, but was part of the National Capital Area during the 1960's and 1970's.

<sup>2</sup> Organization is named after the first African-American poet Phillis Wheatley.

War Work Council “to be used as a combination recreation, residence, and administration building.”

Prior to integration, the PWYWCA was a hub for social functions and change in Washington – hosting social events, meetings and conclaves. The late Dr. Dorothy Irene Height served as Executive Director, 1939- 1944. Dr. Height suggested the Mid-Summer Soiree fundraiser after attending a World YWCA garden party in Denmark.

Current programs include a Young Reader’s Program at Seaton Elementary School, the Book Lover’s Club open to residents and the community; and, the annual Prayer Breakfast, Afternoon of Smooth Jazz, and Mid-Summer Soiree events. Community and religious organizations also use the facilities.

PWYWCA was the recipient of the 2005 “Living the Dream” Award from the District of Columbia Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Commission. The Centennial Gala was May 1, 2005. The 105<sup>th</sup> Birthday salute was May 1, 2010; and, the Board of PWYWCA honored its 18 Presidents at the 110<sup>th</sup> on May 3, 2015.

The 2000 major renovation expanded the facility to 117 units; upgrades to the historical section were completed in 2007. A wall-breaking ceremony was held November 2, 2015, with Mayor Muriel Bowser to observe the start of the Redevelopment Project that will result in 84 larger units with comprehensive, onsite services by late 2016.

# Narratives



*Board Members:  
Past and Present*



**REBA M. DIGGS  
BOARD MEMBER**

Reba Diggs joined the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA (PWYWCA) Board of Directors in June 1995. Since joining the Board, Mrs. Diggs has held several leadership positions. Her first assignment after joining the Board was the Property Use Committee, which was a laborious task involving cleaning, painting and purchasing furniture for the rooms. She remembers her husband, brother-in-law, and men from the Metropolitan Baptist Church Men's Club volunteered their time in support of the Committee. She said, "The work was labor-intensive, but enjoyable because they saw the end product of what we were doing." Mrs. Diggs' second leadership responsibility was serving as the Treasurer – a position she held until 2015. She said serving as treasurer came easy to her because when she was in the workforce her job dealt with "many millions of dollars." The treasurer's work was time consuming, but enjoyable. Currently, Mrs. Diggs serves as the Financial Secretary.

Mrs. Diggs said, "I was inspired to join the PWYWCA Board of Directors and accept leadership positions because I've always been a person who wanted to give back." While serving on the Board, Mrs. Diggs was involved in the planning of both the 95<sup>th</sup> and 100<sup>th</sup> PWYWCA anniversary celebrations. She indicated both events were wonderful affairs.

In 1999, Mrs. Diggs remembered the Board sought a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for a two-phase renovation project. The first phase included acquiring and renovating the two townhouses next to PWYWCA for additional housing; the second phase refurbished the resident rooms and other areas of the building. Once again, Mrs. Diggs' husband volunteered his expertise and served as the construction advisor. The ribbon cutting for the newly renovated PWYWCA was in 1999. Mrs. Diggs added, "The Board received a loan from DC Government to do additional renovations in the building in 2005." She said, "During this renovation, we all [not all of us] but many of us who were physically able, worked along with the people to do what we could to enhance the project as much as we could." Mrs. Diggs is excited about PWYWCA's current renovation project that began in 2015.

Mrs. Diggs stated, "PWYWCA's legacy will include the work we are doing for women and children, specifically the legacy of providing services to women who would otherwise be out on the street; and, to uplift the caliber of activities at the Seaton school – it's just been fantastic." She thinks the Board needs to "stretch a little more and try to do activities at the "Y" on a regular basis to help the women who come here to grow... help them to improve their health." She added, the Board can do this and it needs to be done.

INTERVIEWER: PAULETTE C. HOLLOWAY



### **EVELYN B. DORSEY HONORARY BOARD MEMBER**

Evelyn Dorsey joined the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, Inc. (PWYWCA) Board of Directors in 1990; she became a life member in 1991; and a member of the Honorary Board in 2015. She is always honored to show off her gold membership card because it is signed by Alma Cooper Hawkins, who happened to be one of her teachers when she was a student at Randall Junior High. Mrs. Dorsey said, "Mrs. Hawkins was a loving, hardworking person. A servant – a true servant she enjoyed serving the PWYWCA."

Mrs. Dorsey has worked in various capacities during her tenure on the PWYWCA Board. She served on several Board committees – the renovation committee, the membership committee, and chaired the PWYWCA's 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary committee; and, most recently the residence committee. Mrs. Dorsey has also served in elected Board positions as financial secretary and treasurer. Her service as chair of the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary was a memorable occasion for her. The event was held at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel and the guest musician was Roberta Flack. Mrs. Dorsey stated, "It is hard to believe it has been 11 years since the centennial anniversary... and we are still pressing on... that is a blessing."

Mrs. Dorsey was originally invited to join the PWYWCA Board by her friend Lois Branic who was a former Board president. Mrs. Dorsey said, "Once she joined the Board, she observed what was going on and wanted to be a part of it." She described the Board

as being a group of "dynamic women." Mrs. Dorsey attended Cardozo High School when it was across the street from PWYWCA. She knew PWYWCA was there but she never crossed the street to go into the building.

In her current role as an Honorary Board member, Mrs. Dorsey stated, "She would encourage young women who join the Board to 'not only be a member but be an active member' which means serving on a committee and interfacing with the residents." Mrs. Dorsey added, "as a Board member there is so much to learn and gain from the PWYWCA residents." She thinks it should be mandatory "for every member to serve on a committee in some capacity."

Memorable events for Mrs. Dorsey, during her tenure as a Board member, included the Board "tearing down the Y Annex on 13<sup>th</sup> Street and leasing the land to build the *Edward C. Mazique Parent Child Center*." Mrs. Dorsey considers that a highlight in PWYWCA's legacy. Another highlight was when the Board undertook the renovation of the 901 Rhode Island Avenue residence and acquired the two townhouses next door. The current renovation is also a highlight for Mrs. Dorsey. She said, "I am looking forward to the grand opening." She also thinks PWYWCA will "get more and more attention once the renovation is done."

Mrs. Dorsey described the legacy of PWYWCA as "ever evolving." She said while holding a national position in another organization, she travelled frequently between 1994 and 1999, and was always surprised when she met women in other parts of the country who remembered PWYWCA. These were women who "came to DC during the war or during their school years to go to Howard University and they remembered the Y." Mrs. Dorsey thinks the work PWYWCA is currently doing will "broaden our exposure in the country." Her prayer is PWYWCA "will continue to evolve, to grow, to serve, to be a help and a blessing to young women in need of our services."

As she reflected on PWYWCA's history, Mrs. Dorsey finds it ironic the organization started out in one facet of service providing affordable and decent housing to young women coming to the city from other parts of the United States for jobs and school. PWYWCA is still serving women, many who have "slipped through the cracks, and have issues and problems so prevalent today – domestic violence, drugs and mental illness." PWYWCA is serving a population that seems to have been forgotten. Finally, Mrs. Dorsey said, "I hope PWYWCA will continue to never forget our young women."

INTERVIEWER: MAE FRANCES FRAZIER



**FLORENCE J.  
RADCLIFFE  
PAST PRESIDENT AND  
HONORARY BOARD  
MEMBER**

Florence J. Radcliffe is a past president of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA (PWYWCA) Board of Directors and is currently an Honorary Board member. Mrs. Radcliffe first became acquainted with PWYWCA through a friend and colleague, Marjorie Holloman Parker, who was aware the PWYWCA was in search of someone to manage one of their programs, Camp Clarissa Scott. As an educator at Monroe School, in search of summer employment, Mrs. Radcliffe was interviewed and hired by Board president Julia West Hamilton as the camp director for the summer of 1957. She subsequently worked the summers of 1958 and 1959. Mrs. Radcliffe's work as camp director began her work with the PWYWCA Board of Directors.

Mrs. Radcliffe was elected president of the Board in August 1961. She said, "I always wanted the best for the association." It was during Mrs. Radcliffe's administration the PWYWCA entered into discussions to merge with the other YWCAs in the Washington Metropolitan Area to form the YWCA National Capital Area (YWCA NCA). Her daughter, Jacquelyne, remembered a lot of the Board members "coming out against" her mother and "a lot of arguments and discussions" about the potential merger. Jacquelyne, who waited in another office during the Board meetings, described her mother as "feisty...you could sit out there and hear mommy...she could control the crowd, she had a way, and people would listen." Jacquelyne continued saying her mother "stood her ground, she talked like she knew what she was

talking about. As gracious as she was and lady-like as she was, she could turn it on if she had to." And, the Board respected her. Not only did Mrs. Radcliffe want the best for PWYWCA, she also wanted it to remain an independent organization. The PWYWCA attorney wrote the resolution assuring it would remain independent.

A memorable event that took place during her administration was the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. It was during this time the PWYWCA was in merger discussions with the YWCA NCA; and, the YWCA NCA did not want to participate in the March on Washington. Despite the opposition, members of the PWYWCA Board participated in the March on Washington. Mrs. Radcliffe was "overwhelmed by all the people who had come to Washington to be a part of history."

Mrs. Radcliffe turned 100 in June 2016. She was joined in the interview by her youngest daughter, Jacquelyne Radcliffe Thornton.

INTERVIEWER: PATRICIA L. PLUMMER



**JANET M. VERNON  
BOARD MEMBER**

Janet Vernon is a current member of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA (PWYWCA) Board of Directors. She joined the Board in 2003 when Dr. Shirley Mitchell was president and Mrs. Dorothy Patton was a vice president. She was put to work immediately; and, has served as the Board's Corresponding Secretary and Recording Secretary. During her tenure on the Board, Mrs. Vernon has served as chair of the Mid-Summer Soiree and the Afternoon of Smooth Jazz fund raising events as well as a member of the Harvest Festival and Residence Committees.

Mrs. Vernon shared her mother, Henrietta A. McNair, was a board member for many years. She has known many PWYWCA Board members from the 1960s forward, including her high school math teacher, Marian B. DeBerry, a very dedicated member of the Board. Mrs. Vernon remembered those Board members always had a heart for the ladies. She feels this dedication is something the current Board shares with them.

In the 1940's, Mrs. Vernon's mother and aunt were residents at PWYWCA; both migrating to Washington, DC from North Carolina. They were government workers, as were a lot of their friends and fellow residents that lived at PWYWCA. Mrs. Vernon remembers stories about the "succession of cousins that would

come and spend the summer between college semesters" with her mother and aunt.

Since joining the Board, Mrs. Vernon has participated in several significant moments. She recalls the PWYWCA's Centennial in 2005 was a very exciting year with Dr. Dorothy Irene Height as one of our honorees. Mrs. Vernon stated, "The momentum building up to the Centennial was wonderful and it was a memorable event... I think everyone enjoyed it." She mentioned a lot of people who supported PWYWCA through the years were in attendance, including Mrs. DeBerry, who passed in April 2006 at the age of 99. In 2015, PWYWCA celebrated the 110<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as part of the Afternoon of Smooth Jazz. Mrs. Vernon chaired the event. She considers it was one of the best Afternoons of Smooth Jazz because it was a successful financially and the entire Board worked together.

According to Mrs. Vernon, the Board has met her expectations. She said, "It gives me great joy to be on the Board, to form relationships with not just the Board members but with the residents in the building." She added that she does not know all the residents by name nor do they all know her name but when they see her they know she is a member of the Board. She went on to say, "being on the Board has grown me ... I've met some new people, I've encountered some challenge, but it would be a dull existence if the Board agreed on everything." Since joining the Board, Mrs. Vernon has been inspired to accept leadership positions in which she was able to use her financial and organizational skills.

For Mrs. Vernon, the legacy of PWYWCA goes back to something fellow Board member, Reba Diggs, said to her, "African-American women give of their time, talent and treasure" which aptly describes PWYWCA founder Mrs. Rosetta Lawson and the members of the *Book Lover's Club*. Mrs. Vernon also mentioned Mrs. Julia West Hamilton who was PWYWCA's longest serving Board president. Mrs. Hamilton was also a church woman who

went all over the city making sure churches supported PWYWCA. She added the PWYWCA has attempted to do similar outreach within the last five to 10 years; but, many churches are in a different place financially. She knows the redevelopment will benefit the ladies with new services, and hopes it will attract more support from the community.

INTERVIEWER: PATRICIA L. PLUMMER



**JUDITH WEBB, PH.D.  
BOARD MEMBER**

Judith Webb, Ph.D., joined the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA (PWYWCA) Board of Directors on December 18, 2004. During her tenure as a Board member, Dr. Webb has served in leadership positions – as a vice president; a discussion leader and host of the Board’s long running *Book Lovers Club*; and as a mentor to students in the *Seaton After School Program*. She currently, serves as the Historian for the Board of Directors. Dr. Webb said, “She was inspired to assume a leadership position because during her 32 years as an educator she has held a variety of leadership positions.” She served as DC state director for an international drama association; the superintendent’s liaison for the first African-centered program in the DC Public Schools; and, the director of secondary education curriculum and instruction. Early in her retirement, Dr. Webb realized a new calling, “sharing my time and talent not only with children but with older adults.” She feels blessed the PWYWCA provides her an opportunity to work with both.

Since joining the PWYWCA Board of Directors, there have been three memorable events for Dr. Webb – The first event was PWYWCA’s 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which she described as a grand occasion with “city officials and celebrities, including Roberta Flack, a former colleague of hers, members, and friends of the



"y". The second event was having one of the last Tuskegee Airmen, Curtis Christopher Robinson, author of A Pilot's Journey, as a guest at a *Book Lovers Club* session. Her third memorable event was the *Wall Breaking* on November 6, 2015, kicking off the renovation of PWYWCA.

Dr. Webb stated her membership on the PWYWCA Board has met her expectations because she considers herself to be lifelong learner. The PWYWCA has given her the opportunity to re-energize herself. She has cultivated new patterns of thinking with new questions and new answers. Dr. Webb said, "I have travelled new and different venues as I have interfaced with new visionaries who are committed to service as I am. This is a commitment to the community and to all of mankind."

When Dr. Webb thinks about the legacy of PWYWCA, she is reminded of the inscription that appears above the entrance to PWYWCA, which states "*I am come that ye may live and that ye may live more abundantly.*" The legacy is one of hope and help. PWYWCA has "long stood in the community as a beacon of light for women and the community." She was also reminded of a speech shared by President Obama who said, "We are the storytellers which is an awesome responsibility." She feels the PWYWCA Oral History Project is a wonderful opportunity for storytellers to tell the story of PWYWCA.

INTERVIEWER: JOANNA THURSTON-WATSON



**MARY L. QUINN, PH.D.  
FORMER EMPLOYEE**

Dr. Mary L. Quinn worked as a secretary to Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, Inc. (PWYWCA) executive director, Grace Lormans in the 1960's. She said, "Mrs. Lormans was a great woman." During her tenure as a PWYWCA employee, she remembered Florence Radcliffe was the president of the Board of Directors and Walter Washington was the Mayor of DC.

As Mrs. Lormans' secretary, Dr. Quinn took all of her messages, did a lot of typing and collating material. She described her time working at PWYWCA as exciting. She said, "It was exciting to know women can do a professional job and work for a black woman, which was a blessing and an opportunity." Dr. Quinn stated, "Working for an educated woman like Mrs. Lormans influenced her to go back to school to further her education." She later became an advocate at a Circuit Court.

According to Dr. Quinn, PWYWCA under the leadership of Mrs. Lormans and Mrs. Radcliffe had a great impact on the community providing housing to women and giving them opportunities. Additionally, during that time in the history of PWYWCA, children

came in to do their homework. She remembers the director of the youth department taking them on field trips. Dr. Quinn remembers the Board's Mid-Summer Soiree as an event held every year at PWYWCA, which involved many different committees and community organizations.

Dr. Quinn stated, "The PWYWCA was a nice opportunity for young women and for my life as well." She added, "If I could encourage the young women of today, I would tell them to get an education and to do something for themselves to get ahead."

Dr. Quinn was accompanied by her daughter, Sharon Quinn, during the interview.

INTERVIEWER: PAULETTE C. HOLLOWAY

# Former Residents



**ERNESTINE CORBIN  
FORMER RESIDENT**

Ernestine Corbin lived at Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, Inc. (PWYWCA) for four years, and thinks she moved into PWYWCA in 1991 or 1992. At the time, she was travelling back and forth to Montego Bay, Jamaica, and was trying to separate herself from being dependent upon her children and involved in their lives. A colleague referred her to PWYWCA, which was a good option as it was an affordable place to live. While a tenant at PWYWCA, Ms. Corbin participated in many arts and craft shows hosted by the Board. Her craft was making clothespin dolls.

During her tenancy, Ms. Corbin remembers the opening of Metro's Green Line in Shaw. She also remembers the expansion to 117 rooms at PWYWCA. The construction did not bother her because she was out working during the day. She was happy to see the new construction because it meant the PWYWCA could house more women. Ms. Corbin left PWYWCA before the project was completed.

For Ms. Corbin, living at PWYWCA had a great impact on her spiritual growth. She was accustomed to having more in terms of her living space, but she grew accustomed to having less and being content. She, also stated, "Being around different women

and learning not to judge or criticize the differences was good for me." She indicated it was not easy because some women had mental illnesses – there were fights and other disturbances, but in the end, it always turned out peaceful. Ms. Corbin compared living at PWYWCA to living in a dorm at college, with a community bathroom and a community kitchen. Although she had one of the smaller rooms, Room 411, she will never forget her experience at PWYWCA because she grew in that room.

After leaving, Ms. Corbin referred a few friends to PWYWCA as a place to live. Whenever she rides by PWYWCA, she feels as if she is still there. She has noticed the renovation happening now and is looking forward to seeing the newly renovated building. She is aware the women will have a private bathroom inside the room and central air conditioning. When she lived at PWYWCA, there was no central air conditioning nor was there an elevator. She is glad to know the women now have elevators.

INTERVIEWER: PATRICIA L. PLUMMER



**MARGARET GIBSON  
FORMER RESIDENT**

Margaret Gibson was a tenant at Phyllis Wheatley YWCA (PWYWCA) in 1944; she only lived there for approximately two weeks. Mrs. Gibson was 19 years old at the time and came to Washington from Meridian, Mississippi, to work for the United States Treasury Department. At that time the American Red Cross picked her up at Union Station and took her to the Treasury Department at 15th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW. She was in the big city all by herself and her first stop was at the "Y." And, she will never forget it! She shared, at the time she came to Washington, DC, the Federal government was doing a lot of hiring, especially typists. She knew how to type, which is what brought her to DC.

Mrs. Gibson remembered there were other young women, who had come to DC to work for the Federal government, living in places much different than PWYWCA. Those young ladies shared rooms and slept on cots and were restricted in using kitchens. Mrs. Gibson said she visited a few places like this before her supervisor recommended she stay at PWYWCA until she found a permanent place. She was fortunate to have her own room and use of the kitchen whenever she needed it.

Mrs. Gibson's initial thought about Washington, DC, was it was a crowded place. The street cars ran along Benning Road. This was after the War had started; and, it was back when the Government would issue Treasury checks that had to be cashed during a certain period. If you saved the checks and missed the period, you would have to return the checks and wait a long time for the checks to be reissued. Back then, you would also hear the paper boy walking the streets yelling, "Extra. Extra. Read All About It" to sell the daily newspapers. She reflects she was glad to have a safe place because she was somewhat "afraid of the big city."

Mrs. Gibson remembers she was comfortable, the rooms were small but she was around nice people and felt safe, which was very important to her. She considered the other residents at PWYWCA as her friends. They knew she was new and helped her learn about the city. When she arrived at PWYWCA, she had all of her belongings with her including all of her money, but she felt it was okay to leave her bag when she went to work because she knew it was not a good idea to take all her money with her each day. She described PWYWCA as a safe, clean and friendly place. She said, "It was her "home away from home."

Mrs. Gibson stated she really appreciated her time at PWYWCA. Whenever she passes by the building, she thinks about her days there.

INTERVIEWER: JOANNA THURSTON-WATSON



**GLACERIA BROWN  
MASON  
FORMER RESIDENT**

Glacia Brown Mason was a tenant at Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, Inc. (PWYWCA) in 1983. Ms. Mason came to PWYWCA after completing her first year at Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina. She described her time at PWYWCA as being instrumental and pivotal in helping her make "grown-up decisions." Ms. Mason was familiar with PWYWCA because she grew up in the Tenth Street Baptist Church, which is one block over. She saw the building as a child going to and from church and she is grateful the PWYWCA was there for her when she was in need. Ms. Mason was a tenant at PWYWCA for 6 to 12 months – she found it to be a "safe haven" during a transitional time in her life.

During her time as a tenant at PWYWCA, Ms. Mason remembers the city was changing and experiencing the newness of the Metro system. As a native Washingtonian, she knew it was a "big deal" in DC. Other memorable events that occurred in DC while she was at PWYWCA include the *Washington Redskins* won the Super Bowl; the city experienced a huge snowstorm; Marion Barry was the mayor; and, Ronald Reagan was the president. Lastly, Ms. Mason remembers high unemployment during that time, but as a recent graduate of Chamberlain Vocational High School, she felt lucky she had a job working at the National Institutes of Health during her tenancy at PWYWCA.

Ms. Mason shared her grandmother lived to be 91 or 92, and though she never worked outside of the home she was known as the family quilt maker; "if you think of life as a quilt, I can say I am very grateful and will forever be grateful the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA has been a part of the fabric that makes up the quilt of my life." She thinks of the experiences she had while living at PWYWCA – experiences such as going back and forth to work, making adult decisions, no longer living in her parents' house, and paying rent to live.

When asked about the Shaw community while she was a tenant at PWYWCA, Ms. Mason stated from her perspective as a young girl the community was peaceful. Her main focus was "trying to figure out her place – whether she was "going to go left or right." She thought it is was major in 1983 when the PWYWCA was listed on the historic registry. She added, when she thinks fondly of people like Julia West Hamilton, Georgiana Thomas and other women who worked to continue the legacy of PWYWCA, she thinks their legacy is providing a safe place for women. Ms. Mason considers PWYWCA a beacon in the Shaw community that is still standing after 100 plus years – she thinks everybody should know more about PWYWCA and what it does as an organization.

While Ms. Mason did not necessarily make any lasting friendships, the impact of meeting women from different areas of the country was a life lesson. As an example, she stated people in DC don't call soda "pop," but people from Michigan do – she thinks this is the type of lesson that stays with you. There were also students from different parts of the country who were students at Howard University and stayed at PWYWCA until their dorm rooms were ready. During her stay at PWYWCA, Ms. Mason remembers women coming and going.

INTERVIEWER: BRENDA T. FORTENBERRY



**DARRYL PENNINGTON  
FORMER RESIDENT**

Darryl Pennington was a tenant at Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, Inc. (PWYWCA) in 1982. She lived there for approximately one year. Ms. Pennington said, "My time at PWYWCA was a memorable experience and to this day I can reflect back about Phyllis Wheatley YWCA and what a powerful impact it had on me during that time in my life." She remembers her room well, it was on the second-floor – Room 212. She described it as "a peaceful place; it was my place of serenity, my place of ownership, my place of being peaceful."

Ms. Pennington remembers the Shaw Community as being a vibrant place; there was a park where she and other residents would visit; the O Street Market; and, churches where she would go for service – Shiloh Baptist Church and Bishop Long's Church (Scripture Cathedral). She saw Shaw as a place where she could go out, she would speak to people and they spoke to her; she said "it was a community...a good place to be me." She felt good about being in Shaw at the time.

Ms. Pennington chose to live at PWYWCA because she came to DC to make a transition. As a young woman in her 30s, she wanted a place that was safe, comfortable and economical.

Someone referred her to PWYWCA. She knew the YWCA was a Christian association... so she decided to check it out and found the staff to be wonderful. She was shown a room and moved in. She began temping as a receptionist with Hyatt Legal Services and thought it was wonderful to have a new place to live and a new job at the same time.

As a transplant from New York State to Washington, DC, Ms. Pennington was not knowledgeable about the social and political conditions at the time, but she does remember Marion Barry was in office. She said, "I loved Marion Barry and what he stood for and called *DC Chocolate City*." She also noticed and was impressed with African-American women in good jobs doing good things. This made her think DC was a good place to be and she was excited.

Ms. Pennington's social experience at PWYWCA with the other women was a good one. The ladies were wonderful and caring. There ages varied and each had her own challenges; however, one of the great characteristics of the group was caring for one another. At the end of the day they would share stories and ask one another about her day. She saw herself as the floor monitor and some of the women saw her as the "Mom" of the floor. She and her fellow floor residents would sometimes buy food, cook and eat together. She fondly remembers a time when she had the flu and her neighbors cared for her. She said it was those times that carried her through, and she still gets emotional thinking about how caring everyone was.

When describing the impact PWYWCA had on her life, Ms. Pennington stated she believes everything has a destiny and purpose as she reflects back 30 years - PWYWCA was a destiny place for her. She added "you may not know but God knows where he's going to place you strategically." Ms. Pennington said, "PWYWCA was a stepping stone for her destiny as it related to her spiritual life, her career and her overall life journey." She continued by stating when you are in a situation in any area of

your life, it is important to have a "place to feel safe while you go to the next level" and that's what PWYWCA was for her.

Ms. Pennington said that for her, PWYWCA will always be a safe haven for empowerment and protection. She is thankful that God placed her there at that time in her life. When thinking about her time at PWYWCA, she often says, "no matter where we are, no matter who we are, one thing women, African-American women have is the strength of surviving, the strength of empowering, and the strength of supporting, and that's what we did there, and that's my story."

INTERVIEWER: KAREN HOLLIDAY



*Community*

*Partners*



**SYLVIA Y. CYRUS  
COMMUNITY  
PARTNER**

Sylvia Cyrus is the Executive Director of the Association for the Study of African-American Life and History (ASALH). For the greater part of its 101-year existence, ASALH had an office on Ninth Street in the Shaw area down the street from the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, Inc. (PWYWCA). ASALH and PWYWCA not only exist in the same community but share many members between the two organizations and have had the opportunity to partner with, attend and support each other's events. According to Ms. Cyrus, ASALH recognizes the importance of PWYWCA and what it has meant to African-American women in leadership. Relative to how we have progressed, it has provided a great opportunity for African-American women "to lead an organization and be connected to the community."

Ms. Cyrus stated, "ASALH's founder, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the *Father of Black History*, was "very, very interested in connecting with the community to bring forth historical information and to dispel the lies the African-American community did not have a history." She added PWYWCA has been a great part of this history and the leadership of

PWYWCA has been important in "telling the story of African-American history." As the executive director of ASALH, Ms. Cyrus said, "I am well aware of the service PWYWCA has provided to women and families in the community."

Ms. Cyrus shared ASALH's first female president was Mary McLeod Bethune who mentored Dorothy Height. When Dorothy Height worked at PWYWCA and Dr. Woodson had meals there, the two had a good relationship in terms of promoting the association. Both organizations have impacted the "building up of our community to know the strength of African-Americans and our history." She continued by saying the "service PWYWCA provides has been just a great, great legacy for both organizations."

In terms of the future for the Shaw community, Ms. Cyrus stated, "Although the 'dynamics and the population' of the community are changing, both ASALH and PWYWCA have a responsibility to make sure the rich history African-Americans have brought to this community is not forgotten." To do this, Ms. Cyrus said, "It is important for both organizations to stay entrenched with this new population coming into our community, and make sure they are aware of what we have meant as a people to this community and certainly to DC and America. It will be a challenge to make sure our story is told." In conclusion, Ms. Cyrus stated, "As an organization, ASALH looks forward to working with elected officials and all who support the community to make sure they never forget."

INTERVIEWER: THERESA B. LEEKE



**REVEREND ROBERT L.  
FELTON  
COMMUNITY PARTNER**

The Reverend Robert Felton has been a member of Shiloh Baptist Church since he was baptized as a child in 1942. He was born and raised on Euclid Street, which he described as being less than a mile north of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA (PWYWCA). During his work career, Reverend Felton worked for the Fire Department in the Shaw area for 27 years until he retired in 1989. After retirement, Reverend Felton went to seminary and has worked as the Director of Human Services for Shiloh Baptist Church for almost 20 years.

Reverend Felton said, "He has had interactions with the residents of PWYWCA for many years because many come to town unprepared for what they need to obtain housing." He said, "Shiloh's human services program tries to assist persons with security deposits and first month's rent." This is primarily how he initially comes in contact with a lot of PWYWCA's residents. Reverend Felton said he stays in contact with residents who have received assistance from Shiloh; and, residents sometimes call him, stop by to say hello or to make another request for assistance.

Reverend Felton said, "The PWYWCA has always been a place "where mothers and parents from the South would send their

daughters and they found very inexpensive living until they were employed and able to take care of themselves." He added it may have changed some but the "fact it still says Young Women's Christian Association makes an old preacher feel kind of good." He continued to say the fact *Christian* is in the name helps him to believe the residents receive help in understanding of life.

In conclusion, Reverend Felton stated as it relates to the partnership between Shiloh and PWYWCA – Shiloh is here to help PWYWCA. He said "let it be known anytime there is someone who you feel needs some spiritual assistance or needs any kind of assistance, just let me know beforehand." And, he will come prepared to assist them with the best Shiloh has to offer.

INTERVIEWER: PAULETTE C. HOLLOWAY

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