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Lifetime of advocacy

YWCA volunteer still ringing doorbells at 92

By SANDY NAIMAN, TORONTO SUN

Long before the United Way was founded in 1956, Edith Vuchnich was "ringing doorbells" for the good of Toronto.

Today, this elegant and vibrant 92-year-old career volunteer, considered a "foremother" of the YWCA of Toronto, is still ringing doorbells in her own way.

"Edith is one of a sadly dwindling group of women who have remained engaged through many incarnations of the YWCA's work," said Amanda Dale, director of advocacy and community development.

Vuchnich works at least 60 hours a month with the "Y's" International Co-operation Committee, the Volunteer Recognition Committee and in its International Boutique, which she helped start more than 40 years ago.

At 7 a.m. one day last week, the Ohio-born university grad and great-grandmother who joined the YWCA "Girls Reserves" as a teenager, reminisced about her 60-plus years of volunteerism in Toronto.

"There were so many services women could give to the community that would make the city a great place to live," she said, listing not only her major commitment to the YWCA, but also her work with the United Church, Oxfam, the Rotary Club and the American Women's Club.

In 1946, Vuchnich laid the cornerstone for the YWCA's Woodlawn Ave. headquarters and residence, chaired a committee to help integrate urban factory workers into Y programs and served on its board.

"It was Edith's vision and leadership in the early 1940s that led to our acquiring this land and building this residence that now houses 133 women either permanently or in our shelter," said Marilda Tselepis, YWCA director of employment and skills development.

"She's always been very interested in everything and such a great model."

Fifty years ago, "we were one of the founding partners of the United Way and we worked together and helped each other grow," Vuchnich recalled.

Through contacts the YWCA and the other 26 founding agencies were able to provide, the United Way "was able to branch out more into the community" reaching a wider scope of people.

This "central agency was an enlightened idea" because it meant United Way funding paid for each agency's core services, she said, freeing canvassers to fundraise for new and expanded programs.

"At first, it took courage and faith, but we at the YWCA always thought it was right," said Vuchnich, who served not only as president of the Toronto YWCA, but also as national president from 1962 to 1965.

In 1956, the YWCA received \$220,000 from the United Way and in 2006, their allocation is \$1.3 million, but "we also raise as much as we are allocated," Dale stated.

Ten years ago, the Y was a multi-service women's organization with about 5,000 participating in programs and using their services.

In 2005, "we had just under 35,855 Torontonians -- women, men and children coming to us and we are now the recipient of the fourth largest United Way allocation, more than the YMCA," Dale said.

Lorraine Duff, a United Way director, states the YWCA, like the other founding members, "has always responded well to the changing needs of diverse populations across Toronto."

The Y conducted a comprehensive study of issues facing girls in Toronto's suburbs in 2003, she said.

'SPORADIC' SERVICES

This research found services were "small, unco-ordinated and sporadic," so they developed a Girls' Centre in Scarborough which the United Way funded, promoting self-esteem, physical and emotional health. For the first time, these young women have a drop-in centre of their own, a girls' council and an array of programs supported by inspiring role models, Duff said. "I've been there and it's a great place for them to be, where they can have fun and they can blossom."

A focus of this year's ambitious \$100 million campaign is youth and newcomers, said Frances Lankin, United Way president and CEO.

"We want to help neighbourhoods with few social service supports, and newcomers with high levels of education and professional credential who find it hard to get work in their fields," she said.

"What we're really all about is people coming together to make a difference in their communities."