

WEAA HISTORY

“Women out of whom more might have been made” was the theme of a lecture given by Frances E. Willard at the inaugural meeting of an educational association formed by a group of Evanston women in 1871. While that language may sound archaic to the modern ear, it was an apt description of the WEAA’s mission to promote the higher education of women.

The vision and purpose of these women was remarkable, coming at a time when society did not place great value on providing women with access to higher education. But these women were not typical of the times. Frances Willard, often remembered as the founder of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, was also a prominent 19th Century feminist and leader of the women’s suffrage movement.

The WEAA founders’ original intent was to assist students at the Evanston College for Ladies, which Frances Willard served as president. In little more than a year, these enterprising women had obtained a house, furnished it, named it “College Cottage,” and welcomed their first group of six students. The residence was managed according to the Holyoke Plan, with the young women paying a modest weekly rent (\$2 in the early years) and sharing in the household tasks.

WEAA’s future course was soon impacted by two historic events. In 1871, the Chicago Fire caused a financial setback for the College for Ladies. In 1873, Northwestern became one of the first private universities to admit women (more than a century ahead of its Ivy League counterparts). As a result, the Evanston College for Ladies was absorbed by Northwestern in 1874. WEAA’s mission did not change, it simply shifted course to support women students at Northwestern.

In the early going, the WEAA board relied on several male benefactors to advise on financial and other matters. But in 1879 the women adopted a new constitution that vested all authority in the members of the board. As an early history recounts: “. . . the Association entered upon a new era. There were no men in the membership. Matters financial and otherwise were in the hands of women, for weal or woe.”

The women were capable managers. College Cottage was expanded several times, and by the turn of the century, it housed 60 students. Gifts from friends and former board members enabled the WEAA to establish an endowment fund that would support the association’s work for years to come. In 1901, the residents of the Cottage proposed that its name be changed to Pearsons Hall in honor of Hannah (Mrs. John A) Pearsons, a charter member of the board “who has served the home faithfully for thirty years.”

In 1904, another early benefactor --Dr. D. K. Pearsons—enabled the WEAA to provide housing for more students. He offered to build a dormitory for the university with the stipulation that it be operated by the WEAA. The new residence was built at the corner of University Place and Sherman Avenue. It was named Chapin Hall in honor of Dr. Pearsons' sister-in-law, Julia Chapin, "a liberal friend of education" and a supporter of the Mount Holyoke model.

With two residences housing more than 100 students, the WEAA board settled into a pattern that combined sound financial and business management with personal interest in the wellbeing of the residents. "The co-operative home life in the halls is carried on under supervision of the house director assisted by a cook and laundress and a house man. The other work is divided evenly among the resident students. Aside from the care of their own rooms, the housework does not require more than an hour a day from each...The high scholarship of many of the young women... has been most gratifying."

The WEAA chronicles show that neither the board nor the scholars were reluctant to break new ground. The women of Chapin and Pearsons Halls adopted a form of hall government several years before the university gave its blessing to student self-government. In 1922, the WEAA board recommended to the university trustees that a woman physician be hired to see to the health care needs of women students.

Prudent management of WEAA funds and real estate made it possible for the association to weather the Depression. However, receipts were down because some women had withdrawn from the university for lack of funds. In 1933, occupancy at the two halls reached its lowest level, 65 students. In 1935, the board decided to close Pearsons Hall and present the building to the university.

WEAA scholars and board members contributed to the war effort in the 1940s. Chapin Hall residents led the campus in contributions to the Red Cross. They entertained the troops at USO shows at Fort Sheridan. The board provided scholarships for student nurses at Evanston Hospital.

Chapin Hall residents earned both leadership and scholarship recognition. In 1943, a Chapin resident was elected head of student government. Forty-eight Chapin women belonged to professional and honorary sororities and 31 residents held university scholarships. These traditions continued over the next three decades. Chapin was regularly among the top-ranked women's housing units in scholarship. Two Chapin women—Barbara Caulfield ('69, L72) and Eva Jefferson Patterson ('71)—lead student government during the tumultuous days of the Vietnam War and advocacy for student rights, especially for women. The latter movement saw the end of rules that required women (but not men) in university housing to sign in and out, and led to

the approval of parietal hours (allowing men and women students to visit in each others' rooms), use of alcohol in student residences, and the beginning of coed housing at Northwestern.

Faced with what they considered fundamental changes in the way Chapin Hall had always operated, the WEAA board decided the time had come to turn the keys back to the university. It was a difficult decision, made only after long and heart-wrenching discussion. In December of 1967, Chapin Hall residents received a letter from WEAA board president Gretchen McEwen, announcing that management of the hall was being transferred to Northwestern, a decision accepted by the university in a letter to the board, saying in part, "Your gesture is only the newest in a continual series of outstanding services which WEAA has performed for Northwestern University over the years....the Association has brought the advantages of a Northwestern education to many girls who would otherwise have been unable to enjoy this."

Although the decision to cease operating a women's residence was the most sweeping change in WEAA history, it was by no means an abandonment of the organization's mission. The board announced its intention to continue to support the educational goals of women students at Northwestern by providing tuition grants. That practice continues, as does the board's efforts to provide a friendly, supportive environment for WEAA scholars.

Francis Willard's 1871 lecture on "women of whom more might have been made" marked the beginning of a unique endeavor to help young women "make more" of their lives via a Northwestern education. Northwestern's alumni ranks include thousands of WEAA scholars who are leading lives of purpose and service in their professions and their communities.