

THE WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL AID ASSOCIATION

Founded 1871

The Women's Educational Aid Association was founded in 1871 to promote the higher education of women. For most of its first 100 years, the WEAA operated a residence for women students at Northwestern University. Since 1968, the association has provided tuition grants to women students at Northwestern who meet the WEAA criteria of superior academic ability, personal potential, and financial need.

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A Brief 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 organization's mission, which was to promote the higher education of women. The vision and purpose of these women was quite remarkable, coming as it did 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, best remembered as the founder and long-time leader of the Women's Christian Temperance union, was also a prominent 19th Century feminist active in the woman's suffrage movement.

The association intended to assist students at the Evanston College for Ladies, which had just elected Frances Willard as its president. (The College had been founded in the wake of the failure of another institution, the Northwestern Female College). Miss Willard was one of the eight women who formed the Aid Fund Committee of the educational association. ¹ Their charge was "To investigate the various systems of aiding needy students, employed by institutions at home and abroad, and to give the Association and the College the benefit of their discoveries; to canvass the claims of applications for aid and to recommend to the College such as shall seem worthy of help; to have a friendly oversight of such young women while here, and to assist them in obtaining situations where they may aid themselves either during or after their school years."

It did not take long for the committee to put their charge into action. 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. A matron provided on-site management and the members of the Aid Fund took turns serving as the "monthly visitor" who was to "hear all complaints, settle all difficulties, make all necessary purchases and be absolutely responsible for the management of affairs during her term of office."

The members of the WEAA took a personal interest in the welfare of the Cottage and its residents. "A deep and loving interest was manifested in the spiritual as well as the temporal well-being of the students. The personal oversight possible in a small family brought the committee and the Cottage girls very near together." Then, as now, the guiding purpose of the WEAA was to provide a

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supportive environment in which young women could pursue their ambition and realize their potential. But while staying true to its mission, the organization has adapted to changing times.

One defining event in WEAA's early history was the great Chicago fire of October 1871. Although Evanston was not touched by the fire, the College for Ladies suffered a major financial setback due to the destruction of its prime real estate holdings in Chicago. Construction on a planned new building for the College came to a halt. In 1874, Northwestern absorbed the College for Ladies and completed the building, calling it the women's College of Northwestern University (today it is the Music Administration Building). During this same period, as the College for Ladies was struggling to survive, a fresh wind was blowing at Northwestern, leading to another change that would affect the WEAA.

In June of 1869, the Northwestern board of trustees met to elect a new president. Their prime candidate was Erastus O. Haven, then president of the University of Michigan. Haven had introduced coeducation at Michigan, and he apparently signaled the Northwestern board that he would not consider accepting their offer unless, as Frances Willard put it, "the doors of the Methodist institution [Northwestern] were flung wide open to women."² The trustees acceded to his wishes and in the fall of 1869 Northwestern became one of the earliest private coeducational institutions in the country. "Northwestern thus became a fully coeducational institution of higher learning, almost a century before its counterparts in the Ivy League. Northwestern's contributions to equal—but not separate—educational opportunities for women and men was a pioneering effort for which its sons and daughters can be truly proud."³

With the closing of the Evanston College for Ladies, the Aid Fund Committee was the only entity of the original Educational Association that still had a purpose. While the parent organization ceased to exist, the Aide Fund Committee in 1874 was incorporated as the Woman's Educational Aid Association. College Cottage was expanded, largely through the generosity of Dr. D. K. Pearsons, who also contributed to the room and board costs of several residents.

The WEAA board itself was not unaffected by the winds of change. In the early years, the women depended on Dr. Pearsons and several other men to help keep the association's financial house in order. But by 1879, the women adopted a new constitution that vested all the authority in the members of the board. "With the staff of officers 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 record shows 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 enable 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 Pearson Hall – not in honor of Dr. Pearsons the benefactor, but in honor of Hannah (Mrs. John A) Pearsons, a charter member of the board "who has served the home faithfully for thirty years." (Pearsons Hall, at 619 Clark Street, later housed the Northwestern administrative offices and is now the bursar's office.)

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From 1872 to 1904, the WEAA housed a total of 1,433 students. Still, the association could not accommodate all the young women who applied. Dr. Pearsons stepped in again, this time offering to build a women's dormitory for the university with the stipulation that it be operated by the WEAA. The two parties endorsed his proposal, and a new residence hall that doubled the space available for WEAA scholars 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."

In 1909 the board created "the Home Scholarship Fund" as a means to continue the tradition (begun by Dr. Pearsons) of providing free room and board to students of exceptional promise and great need. Several such scholarships were created in memory of board members and benefactors. "The Association wished to emphasize the fact that more permanent scholarships are needed. They desire to impress upon their friends that it is a great investment to give to a deserving young woman an education that will help her to make the best use of her life."

The WEAA chronicles show that neither the board nor the scholars were reluctant to break new ground. The women of Chapin and Pearsons Hall 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 women physician be hired to see to the health care needs of women students.

The mundane matters of dormitory life and maintenance are also recorded. In 1925, some residents complained they were "annoyed by the constant clicking of typewriters in the dormitories." It was noted that Pearsons Hall had acquired a new electric washing machine and a new vacuum cleaner. "With these electric servants work became quicker and easier, giving the girls much more time for outside pursuits. The machine age was becoming delightful."

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, with the stipulation that "if and when the University has a demand for Woman's Educational Aid Association accommodations greater than is provided by Chapin, Northwestern University will provide an adequate building for such use, all assessments to be adjusted."

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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.

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. While the students continued to excel in academic pursuits, the board renewed its efforts to make Chapin Hall an attractive home away from home. A grand piano was purchased, living rooms and students rooms were redecorated and the kitchen was remodeled. "The board wished Chapin Hall to be as attractive as any dormitory on the Campus, and wanted the residents to have the necessary adjuncts to modern housekeeping."

Not all board decisions had to do with housekeeping and maintenance. The end of the war saw a number of marriages. "The board agreed to exclude married girls from the Hall on the grounds that their additional resources and their status as married women made it possible for them to live elsewhere, while their places might be filled by more needy girls." On the questions of whether students who joined social sororities could continue to live at Chapin, the board decided, "in order that no injustice might be done, that the need for continued residence of each girl who joined a sorority should be reviewed, as the case arose." (In later years, the policy was to prohibit sorority members from living at Chapin.) Rising costs forced an increase in room and board to \$375.00 per year. "But this was only half that of Willard and other open dormitories."

In 1949, the WEAA published a history of the organization that carried a list of the names of the 72 women who had served on the board since its founding. The booklet included numerous examples of board members' devotion to their mission and of students' appreciation of the experience of living at Chapin Hall. The history concludes with a quote from Dr. Pearsons when he announced his plans to build Chapin Hall: "What can you do with money? How can you invest it so that it will do good forever? The ladies of the Women's Educational Aid Association of Evanston have solved this problem in a very marked degree." The response from Hannah Pearsons is also quoted: "We assume the care of this home as a duty, which we will endeavor, as long as the keys remain in our possession, to discharge to the best of our ability."

The 1949 WEAA board of directors could not have predicted that, in less than 20 years, the association would once again have to adapt to the changing times. The 1960s was a decade of profound and rapid change throughout the world. Northwestern, like campuses across the country, was caught up in the debate over such issues as civil rights, the Vietnam War and women's equality. One of the longstanding social doctrines that was destined to fall was the then-common practice on most college campuses of having a more restrictive set of rules for women than for men. Women who lived in university housing at Northwestern were required to be in at a certain hour (usually 11:00 p.m. on weeknights and 2:00 a.m. on weekends) and were expected to sign in and out during evening hours. These restrictions were lifted in the mid-1960s, as were restrictions on male visitors, use of alcohol in students' rooms, and other rules. Also, the university was beginning to consider coed dormitories.

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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, accepting the property 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. The number of scholars average about 20, and each year several members of the incoming class are invited to join the group. Board members and scholars have two dinner meetings each year, which provide the opportunity to get to know one another better. WEAA scholars are encouraged to contact the board as special needs arise.

Frances Willard, Hannah Pearsons, and their colleagues would no doubt be pleased to know that the work they began in 1871 continues today. Surely they would also rejoice in the progress of "women out of whom more might have been made." The thousands of WEAA scholars who are making important contributions to family, community, and society at large, are a testimonial to the wisdom and foresight of the WEAA founders and their belief in the value of equal access to higher education.

- 1 A History for the Women's Educational Aid Association published by WEAA in 1949. All direct quotes in this history, unless otherwise noted, are from the document.
- 2 Quinn, Patrick, "Coeducation at Northwestern: A History, " Northwestern Perspective, Vol. 1, No. 1
- 3 Ibid.

This newly updated history of the Women's Educational Aid Association is dedicated with respect and affection to Gretchen (Mrs. Ernest) McEwen, a member of the board for nearly 40 years, who in 1992 changed from active to associate status. Mrs. McEwen's singular devotion to the women of Chapin Hall is remembered by many who lived there during her tenure on the WEAA board, particularly her years as president of the association. In succeeding years, she maintained an active interest in the work of the board and the scholars, seldom missing a meeting. We honor her as an outstanding embodiment of the mission and purpose of the Women's Educational Aid Association.

Evanston, Illinois, October 1992