

The Junior League of Rockford's Legacy of Programs

Founded in 1930, the Junior League of Rockford, Inc. is comprised of a diverse group of women who share a commitment to making our community a better place to live and work. Junior League of Rockford's mission is to promote voluntarism, develop the potential of women, and improve the quality of life in our community by focusing on the education and welfare of women, children and families. This is accomplished by building coalitions, forming new projects to meet community needs, funding the inception of the projects, helping to develop and make them self-sustaining, and then turning them over to another community organization or newly formed board of directors. Each year, Junior League of Rockford members vote to undertake development of a new program or to renew the Junior League's commitment to a project already under development.

The Junior League of Rockford is proudly celebrating its 79 years of service to the Rock River Valley. Throughout its long history, the Junior League of Rockford has been involved in the development of numerous community facilities and programs that have had an immeasurable impact on the greater-Rockford community. The Junior League of Rockford has touched the lives of over 10 million people in the region through projects initiated by its membership. Highlighted below are the projects and programs that are still active, thriving organizations in the community.

Initiated in 1930, Ken-Rock Community Center was Junior League of Rockford's first community project. What was then known as The Junior League House began as a Welfare Station, and became the focus of the Junior League for its first 20 years. The center initially offered health and dental services, a library, a mother's club, a rummage department and loan closet among other services. After its first decade it was renamed Ken-Rock Community Center. Today, the center is aimed at educating people in health and wholesome use of leisure time, developing leadership within the community, providing varied activities designed to fill the needs of the total community, and creating opportunities for the development of special skills and interests. Ken Rock serves over 60,000 people annually.

In 1956, the Junior League membership voted to develop the Washington Park Community Center. After the Junior League received the support of the Rockford Park District, members walked door-to-door to interview residents in the neighborhood about what they hoped to see in a new community center. The Junior League donated to the community center's building fund and created supplemental health, welfare, and education programs. Today, the center provides area residents with facilities for play space and organized programs for children, as well as educational and counseling services for adults. Washington Park, now owned by the Rockford Park District, serves over 54,000 people each year.

Stepping Stones, a collaboration of the Junior League of Rockford, Winnebago County Mental Health Society, and Singer Mental Health Center, opened in April 1970. Junior League renovated the original Stepping Stones house, where up to 10 residents learned to live in a family-type setting after leaving a state hospital. During its first years of operation, Junior League members remained active in volunteer recruitment, office and residential needs, house and grounds upkeep, and organizing special events. Today, Stepping Stones continues to provide housing and rehabilitative services to adults with serious mental illnesses. Stepping Stones is comprised of five group homes, seven apartment buildings, and the Mildred Kral Rehabilitation Center. The current capacity for clients is 130.

The Junior League of Rockford and Protestant Community Services initiated Bright Side Day Care for the Elderly in 1973 with funding through Title VII of the Older Americans Act. The name was later changed to Bright Side Adult Day Center and became a part of Lifescape Community Services. The impetus for this project was the steadily growing population of elderly adults, combined with caregivers for the elderly who were entering the workforce in greater numbers, making it more difficult to care for aging parents. Bright Side serves the adult who needs increased attention, but not the level of care furnished by a nursing home. Bright Side provides a place for adults to go for companionship, recreation, and respite care. Placing an elderly member in Bright Side allows families to work and know their loved one is safe, stimulated, and occupied. Today, Bright Side has two adult day centers in Rockford and will be opening another day center in Belvidere. The centers serve approximately 55 people daily.

In 1979, the Junior League membership voted to develop a new kind of museum in Rockford. The Junior League and the Rockford Council for the Arts and Sciences developed a hands-on children's science museum. In the beginning, the members tested exhibit ideas by setting them up in their own basements for the kids in their neighborhood to try out. The Discovery Room started with 12 stations that were built by local volunteers and Junior League members and spouses. Today, the Discovery Center Museum has over 200 hands-on exhibits plus traveling exhibitions and special events. The museum was recently ranked as one of the top four children's museums in the nation. The Discovery Center has welcomed over 1,900,000 visitors since its inception and currently has over 2,000 members.

The Junior League also realized that there was a need in Rockford for children to have advocates in court. In 1986, the Junior League in association with retired Judge Bradner Riggs initiated Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). CASA assists children in Court who have been abused or neglected by appointing a CASA volunteer as a guardian ad litem. The CASA volunteer is the child's advocate in Court during the entire time the case is open, sometimes lasting as long as three years. CASA volunteers monitor and report on the case until the child is in a safe, permanent home and the case is closed. To date, 1,374 children have benefited from the services of CASA and there are currently 230 open and active cases at this time.

The Youth Services Network, Inc. was initiated in 1986 by the Junior League of Rockford, in collaboration with the Inter Agency Council of Representatives of Youth Service. Its aim was to prevent duplication of services to troubled youth and their families. Youth Services Network provides assistance to agencies such as police, sheriff, probation, and DCFS. The non-profit organization assists agencies in coordinating services to emotionally and mentally disturbed youth, pregnant and parenting teenagers, runaway and homeless youth, teenage drug and alcohol abusers, truant youth, sexually and physically abused children, and youth in foster care. Youth Services Network also provides direct services to youth and operates a youth homeless shelter. It is a model agency in the State of Illinois for innovative collaboration and coordination of services for troubled youth and their families. The Youth Services Network serves up to 1,800 youth each year.

In June 1991, the Junior League of Rockford, the Rockford Park District, and the Discovery Center Museum completed the Rock River Discovery Park, the first community-built outdoor

science park in the United States. The park, which is located directly adjacent to the Discovery Center Museum, was developed by a community steering committee composed of engineers, educators, parents, and students who worked under the leadership of New York based architect Bob Leathers. The Junior League was instrumental in organizing over 4,300 volunteers to help construct the park. The science park has attracted over one million visitors.

The Junior League of Rockford, along with WAVE and the 17th Circuit Court, organized the Domestic Violence Assistance Center to assist domestic violence victims in obtaining orders of protection against abusive partners and to educate the victims on breaking the cycle of violence. Originally, only 25% of the women who started the order of protection process carried through with it. Since the Assistance Center opened in June of 1998, the number of orders of protection that have been carried through to completion has improved each month. Junior League also created the Domestic Violence Order of Protection Information Line. A recorded message gives the caller information on what to do in an emergency situation, information about the Assistance Center, the specifics of obtaining an order of protection, and names of other agencies for help.

In 2002, the Junior League of Rockford in collaboration with the Rock River Chapter of the American Red Cross and Rockford Public School District 205 developed MAYA'S House, a daytime drop-in center for homeless mothers and their children. MAYA'S House, which stands for Mothers and Youth Attaining Stability, was the first center of its kind in the Rockford area, and one of a handful throughout the nation. MAYA'S House provides services in the areas of parenting, public health, literacy, mental health, life skills, and community referrals in addition to providing temporary daycare services and daytime respite. In 2005, Shelter Care Ministries became the managing partner of the MAYA'S House program and became the sole administrator in 2007.

The Junior League of Rockford's current project is RAISE (Reaching and Inspiring Students for Education). In 2007, the Junior League of Rockford developed and implemented RAISE at Jefferson High School in collaboration with the Mayor's Office of Education and Lifelong Learning, the Community Education Partnership, and Rockford Public School District 205. The RAISE program is aimed to increase access to and success in post high school education for financially disadvantaged, underrepresented and first generation college students from the Rockford Public School System. According to the U.S. Census, 80% of adults in Rockford over 25 years of age have an education below a Bachelor's degree and only 15% of 18-24 year olds in Winnebago County are enrolled in a College or University.

The RAISE program consists of approximately 50 selected Juniors and Seniors who receive one-on-one mentoring from trained Junior League members and community volunteers who guide them in their journey to post-secondary education. The Junior League develops and implements workshops on various topics related to the college application process such as ACT test preparation, college applications, financial aid & scholarships and college survival skills. There are also opportunities for students to tour various college campuses. The workshops and college tours are open to all students. The Junior League employs a part-time program coordinator who works on-site at Jefferson High School. The Junior League of Rockford plans to develop and implement the RAISE program to be used as a model for all area high schools in the Rockford community.