

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown YMCA Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 755

HELEN SUBER

Interviewed

by

Jeffery Collier

on

September 8, 1975

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: HELEN SUBER

INTERVIEWER: Jeffery Collier

SUBJECT: clubs, secretarial duties, transition, financial positions

DATE: September 8, 1975

C: This is Jeff Collier. I'm with the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. I'm sitting today at the Youngstown YMCA on 17 North Champion Street. Today's date is Monday, September 8, 1975, and the time is approximately 11:40 a.m. I'm sitting with Helen Suber, who has been involved with the YMCA since 1947. At that time, she started out with the West Federal Branch YMCA.

Would you please give to me your personal history as far as where you were born, raised, and educated? That should pretty much bring us up-to-date.

S: My name is Helen Suber. I was born in West Middlesex, Pennsylvania, and really have lived in the area all of my life. I am proud to say that I am a graduate of Lowellville High School where I thoroughly enjoyed my days there. I attended Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. I lived in Lowellville for awhile. Then our family moved to Struthers. We lived there for a number of years, then from Struthers to Youngstown where we presently live. We have been here for approximately thirty years.

C: What did you take up when you went to college in Georgia?

S: Business.

C: When you came back to this area, you had worked in several places before you worked at the YMCA. How did you become involved with the YMCA and, specifically, the West Federal Branch of the YMCA?

S: Well, this is the way that it happened, Jeff. I had talked to a man who was on the staff of OSEF at that time about my desire to secure some secretarial work. At the time, I was

unemployed. Low and behold, one day when I really wasn't thinking about it much, to my surprise, he gave me a call and said, "Helen, why don't you go up to West Federal Branch and talk to Jim Smith. He is in need of a secretary." When I went up to see Mr. Smith about it, he was pleased with my past employment experience and references that I gave. He staggered me a little bit. Incidentally, this was on New Year's Day in 1947. He said, "Why don't you start right today." I said, "Today! New Year's Day!" He said, "Why sure. No better time." Really, I put in about four hours of work on a New Year's Day and this is how I actually got started in YMCA work. Don't you know that it staggers even me when I think about the fact that I've actually been with the YMCA a whole twenty-eight years.

- C: I'm kind of surprised that the YMCA was even open on New Year's Day at that time.
- S: At that time, New Year's Day was a big day with the YMCA because they were having large open house observants. All the staff person were there and a lot of people were coming in and out.
- C: Who were the people on the staff that you can remember besides Jim Smith at that time? Do you happen to recall any of those people?
- S: Yes. The Boys Work secretary at that time was Graham Lynch. At that time, they did not have a physical director, but Jim Lottier actually began working as full-time physical director two months after I came.
- C: You mentioned that on New Year's Day the YMCA was having an observance, an open house and things like that. It has been pointed out to me that the West Federal Branch ran many activities such as that. They had numerous clubs and things which met there. Can you recall some of the events which took place at the YMCA while you were there? Perhaps we could just start right from the beginning and go in chronological order.
- S: Suppose I start with the YMCA related groups and their work. There were many groups in the community who loved to use the facilities of the YMCA. The YMCA group that I remember, especially in the initial days when I first started with the YMCA, was a real live wire group called the Women's Auxiliary. They really were a helping hand to the YMCA, for they were interested in the physical appearance of the building. They would do things like make draperies for the lobbies and any needful things which would enhance the appearance of the YMCA.

I like to think of all the club groups that were handled by Mr. Lynch and Hugh Frost. Hugh Frost was a giant in the YMCA program as was Graham Lynch. They really were live wire fellows who had a way with kids. They had a lot of things going that really helped develop leadership in our youngsters. They truly

exemplify the YMCA, when we think of our emphasis on spirit, mind, and body. We get a lot of emphasis on the physical part; there are always a lot of physical activities in YMCA's. But in your club groups you taught fellows, kids, how to be officers and how to speak in front of groups. In the spiritual programs, they got a chance to be leaders in the worship service and to develop their own worship service with the kids who were there. This included assigning them to do this or that. I was just thrilled to see these things marvelously done, helping youngsters so tremendously.

C: Why was the Women's Auxiliary so strong at the West Federal Branch YMCA? I ask that because in 1947 there weren't that many women active in the YMCA. It sort of amazes me that both Jim Lottier and Dave Fleming mentioned the auxiliary, but I never did get a reason why. Do you have any idea why they were so strong?

S: When Dr. Booker was accepted as YMCA Director, he organized the group. It just so happened that his own wife was a real strong force in this auxiliary. However, when I stepped into the picture, these women were getting pretty much up in age. Eventually, they sort of faded out of it. But as they were leaving the scene, Hugh Frost organized another group--the Mother's Council of the YMCA. Actually, we had some forceful women's groups during my many years at the YMCA. Of course, the Mother's Council was a very strong factor in the YMCA program. In many ways, like the Women's Auxiliary, they tried to be helpful to the YMCA. They were organized because they were interested in boys and girls. Therefore, they had money raising projects where part of that money was always--no matter what else they had to do or wanted to do--earmarked for boys and girls' memberships. They had outstanding programs that involved youngsters like the Princess Ball, which involved your sub-teen or the younger girl. They would crown one each year, Princess of the Ball. This was a really lovely affair for kids in that age group. The kids enjoyed it, but at the same time the mothers were providing it for them and making some money too.

C: Was this money used by the YMCA?

S: Yes, that's correct. It would also help them go to their annual conference. The Mother's Council, like other clubs, had conferences all over the state of Ohio.

C: Were those councils in other YMCA's?

S: Yes. They were YMCA related.

C: About what time did the Women's Auxiliary begin to fade out and Hugh Frost's Mother's Council begin to become strong? Was that right when you came or was that in 1950?

- S: I would say the Mother's Council got started in about 1950.
- C: At that time, the auxiliary had pretty much passed from the scene?
- S: That's right.
- C: When you came to the YMCA, you mentioned there were boys and girls. Was the YMCA's membership evenly coed or were there more boys than girls at the West Federal Branch?
- S: There were always more boys than girls. But girls were certainly always included in the program.
- C: Was there a program concerned with the Mother's Council, or did they have actual physical classes and involvement like that?
- S: Oh, no, not like that.
- C: That was more for the boys? Just the boys had a physical program like we have here?
- S: That was more for the boys. Now the girls, as members of the YMCA, participated mostly in the swimming program. The Mother's Council did mostly program work. I already mentioned the Princess Ball. Each year they had a mother-daughter banquet, a Negro History Program in February, and things like that program-wise.
- C: There is an interesting point you just made. Jim Lottier told me that the YMCA shows young blacks who their leaders were and things like that. Of course, black history study is relatively new in the educational system, whether it be at Youngstown State University or in the high schools and grade schools. I thought that was a pretty interesting thing because I wasn't aware the YMCA had a black studies program or anything like that. About when did that begin? Was that already being done when you came there or was that something just started?
- S: That was always part of the Mother's Council program, which got started in about 1950.
- C: Was there anything for the young boys to do with this that had already been started by the time that you came there? Do you remember anything with black studies for boys?
- S: I don't recollect just right now what imparticular might have been done. I do recall the yearly observance.
- C: In 1950, when the Mother's Council began having something like this once a year, did they also have something for the boys once a year or were they strictly on their own?

- S: No. What I am really trying to say is that in February the black community often observed, what we called, Negro History Week.
- C: I understand that, but I thought that there might be something on a monthly basis for the boys like Black History Week. I wanted to find out if there was something done for the boys on a weekly or yearly basis other than the Mother's Council. Jim Lottier mentioned that he tried to emphasize these things and tried to give YMCA kids black leaders to look up to. He would mention these things before a gym class or when they had their club meetings. I wanted to find out if this was something that was established or that you found coming about at this time?
- S: The Boys Work Committee sponsored an annual affair called the father-son banquet. The staff persons who were helping with it would always suggest speakers that our black kids could see, people who had gone in the job market and had achieved. Some of them had actually come through the YMCA too. Of course, that was very appealing to them. We always tried to give black kids a feeling that, "Yes, you can achieve. This is possible because here is someone who has done it. Here's someone from among your own community that you and your parents know. And it can be done."
- C: That's the feeling I found echoed among the people who I have spoken with about the West Federal YMCA. To continue on with the YMCA, when you came there, what was the YMCA like as far as programs and things like that? Also, were there any changes taking place at that time, whether it be internal or external? Were they having financial problems at that time or did the YMCA seem to have a pretty sturdy base?
- S: I would say it had a pretty sturdy base at that time; it was really humming with activity. But looking as a secretary to Mr. Smith and being close to the situation where you can see things on paper and you are always conscious of budget and money, West Federal really wasn't on a sound basis financially. What was happening was where they fell down, Central YMCA was able to pick it up and keep them in business.

The trend I was able to witness in the years that I was there was that we went along beautifully with help from Central YMCA, helping us out budgetwise when we weren't making it ourselves. But then the day came when we were not able to cope, because of our deteriorating building and rising maintenance rates. And what started happening was that we began to cut the staff somewhat to still stay in business. Also there came that moment when Central YMCA started having its own deficit problems, while we had one too. Then when you put both of them together it was too much to cope with. This is where that beginning came in of: Why try to maintain two YMCA's when before our very

eyes it is next to impossible.

C: About what time did you begin cutting back on the staff and things like that? Do you happen to know about what year that would be?

S: Let's see. Following Mr. Smith there was an interim when we did not have a director at all. I served as the acting director following his demise. Then Mr. Hunneke was able to secure the services of Tom Franklin; he was full-time. Even with Tom there full-time, he was the only full-time staff person. He had to use . . . That was where the cutting began. Mr. Lottier had left the YMCA to go into housing.

C: That was about 1968 or 1967.

S: Yes. All right, the next physical person after this and under Tom Franklin were persons we called directors in training. In other words, they were young fellows who were attending Youngstown State University, but at the same time they could give some hours at the YMCA. This is how we secured the services of two very splendid young persons who were with us on a part-time basis. In my judgment, they did an outstanding job for the YMCA. They were William Ellis in the field of aquatics and Elrod Podner in the physical department.

C: Were they there after Tom left or before? Tom Franklin came in 1970, I think.

S: They were there when he came.

C: They must have been there in the interim of Jim Lottier leaving. By the way, had Jim Smith died at this time or was . . . When did Jim Smith die, 1970?

S: Yes.

C: Was Jim Smith still at the YMCA in 1970?

S: No, it must have been sooner than that.

C: Let's say that Jim Lottier left in about 1968. At that time, had Jim Smith already died? I can't remember when he died; it must have been about 1968.

S: Yes, 1968 would hit it good.

C: So for a couple of years you had part-time people?

S: That's true.

C: I thought it was kind of interesting too that you served as the branch executive twice. I think this was after Tom Franklin left.

S: That's right.

C: That's kind of interesting to me. I think you were the only YMCA woman branch executive in the country.

S: I was told this.

C: A couple of people made mention of that. As an executive, did you continue on with the things that were presently going on whether it be physical programs or whatnot? Did you continue in those areas and run the YMCA like that or did you have people like Ellis and Podner who were pretty much in charge of the physical end?

S: Yes, they were.

Pedro Tomez, throughout a period of a good twenty years, ran a very fine boxing program there. This boxing program, I guess, West Federal has really been quite noted for. Pedro was a very dedicated person and he got so much joy out of turning out good fighters. In the interim that I was acting director, since we were having financial difficulty, I would always try to help us to get some income one way or another. One thing about the dormitory though . . . In this way I have been told that we were doing a little better at that than even Central. We always had quite a number of people living in the YMCA building. Most of the time it was almost eighty percent filled.

C: Do they have fifty rooms?

S: Yes, fifty rooms.

C: Were eighty percent of the rooms filled from 1947 until 1972?

S: I would say yes.

C: What type of people were living at the YMCA during the time that you were there? Did it change over the course of the years?

S: I would say that when I first came there were business people, a number of college students, a number of transients, and a number of permanent guests who were also there when the YMCA closed.

C: Do you happen to know what happened to those people?

S: Some of them came down here to the Central YMCA to live; some took the opportunity to get apartments of their own, a number of them did that. Two fellows who own quite a bit of property of their own simply went to live in houses that they owned here in the city.

C: In 1972, when the West Federal Branch YMCA closed, did they

also have about an eighty percent occupancy at that time or not?

- S: Clear up until the time the news got around that there was a possibility we would be closing, we really were up there to seventy-five or eighty percent. This is one area in which we could keep up quite well.
- C: When did you first start hearing either rumors or surmising that the West Federal Branch YMCA would be closed?
- S: I suppose I would answer it in this way. The board of management was simply informed. It wasn't the desire of the Central YMCA to just step right in and say, "You have got to close." They put it this way--We're not doing well financially. For three years now, we have been running on a deficit; we can't go on indefinitely like this. We're at a point where it is hard for us when we get the news that so many major repair jobs are needed up here at West Federal and we can't help you out. Something has got to be done. There either must be an awakened awareness on the part of the black community that they have got to get in there, if they really love this YMCA and share more of the burden of the upkeep of it. Or you can see for yourself businesswise, we can't run it on sentiment--This was the expression that was often used. Of course, just from that moment when the board was informed of these things, we just started talking about the possibility this YMCA might be closed.
- C: When did they hear that? Did this statement come out in 1970, would you say or earlier or later than that?
- S: I would say it was later than 1970.
- C: As you stated, the sentiment was to keep the YMCA open for the black community. While I was talking with Tom Franklin, he said that it was a matter of dollars and cents. They didn't have the ability to go out and raise the funds from the black community that they needed. Could you see any way to raise money in order to keep the YMCA open or was everything exhausted before they closed it up?
- S: I think that the situation had just gotten a little too far out of hand. I say that for this reason. Through the years the building had deteriorated so much that it would have cost a whole lot of money to put that building in really good operation so that you could go on with a YMCA program. It was a staggering amount when you consider that a new swimming pool would be needed. Everything had just deteriorated to the point that the swimming pool was inoperable.
- C: You don't think that the structure of the building and the amount that would be involved in rejuvenating the building could have been raised in any way, shape, or form?

S: And enough to maintain your staff and all that was needed to have an up-to-snuff YMCA . . . I tried things like any federal funded things that might be helpful to the YMCA. For instance, we converted four rooms into office space for a human resources center. They have the main one over on the south side and this was the branch. They would like to have one on each side of town. So when their director came to talk to me about it, I suggested that we could convert four rooms on the second floor into office space for them. And sure enough we did. Even things like that were just a drop in the bucket to our needs.

I'm sure the others must have told you about board members Floyd Haynes, Attorney Floyd Haynes. He came up with the idea of a recognition banquet for the West Federal YMCA.

C: Could you go into that because they didn't mention that?

S: He felt so badly about the fact that West Federal would be closing if we didn't--the black community now--come up with something appreciable to help ourselves, that he put together, with our board members, what he called a recognition banquet. He called it the Old Ship; he was referring to West Federal YMCA. The financial part of it was that people were to pay ten dollars to go to the Mahoning Country Club for this affair. You know how that is: Part of it goes for the expense of the affair and the remainder goes to the YMCA. He put together a very outstanding program with some of the persons who have come through the YMCA and felt the same about the YMCA and wanted to see it be a going thing. They came here to appear on the program. Some of those who came were Attorney Napoleon Bell from Columbus; Nathaniel Jones, who is now the chief council for the NAACP, was there. And just many of the outstanding persons who have come through the West Federal YMCA were there to appear and give their contribution.

Reverend Morris Lee was the master of ceremonies at the banquet. It was a big and tremendous things. People really responded to it in the black and white communities, even some businesses came. Reverend Lee put it to them really well that night. He said, "Now, what you are doing here tonight can be one of two things. It can mean that you really mean business about getting some input in West Federal YMCA, not for just this one occasion because the needs are many, but as a continual thing. Or now I am telling you if you don't, then you have to write this affair down as a fitting tribute to the Old Ship, the West Federal YMCA, that at least she went down in glory. In plain words, it's her continuation or it's her funeral. Now you are the ones, right out there; who will be the answer to this?" It was a going tribute and a very fine effort on his part. But even the six or seven thousand dollars--after all expenses were paid for that one affair--is hardly what you need when you have a mammoth thing like all those needful repairs.

The electrical unit went bad; you had your leaks in the building, and the swimming pool went bad. It was just deteriorating because through the years, there never was quite enough money to keep things up; you just did the repair work that had to be done to keep you from caving in. Yet, the time came when we were just about caving in.

In the final analysis, I would say, that there was much sentiment about West Federal closing because it stood tall in the community and it met the needs of the people in the community. Incidentally, our members weren't just in the adjacent area; they were from all over town. When you think about the groups that like to meet in the YMCA: Sunday School Association, Beacon Union, the Negro American Labor Council, your college groups, and fraternities and sororities at YSU who met and had affairs there. They wanted to help save the ship, as Floyd Haynes had said to them. But with all of this, we simply weren't able to cope with it. Then too there was the location we were in. The parking situation was getting to be a terrific strain too. So you put all these in together and it just meant that the sensible thing to do had to be that we would simply close up the branch YMCA, even with all the sentiment and love for that YMCA.

As you know, this YMCA [Youngstown YMCA] is very comparable to the best in the country.

C: There's no doubt about that.

S: As you walk around this building, you can see that we blacks are in every phase of the work here. So we are here, black and whites together, in this beautiful YMCA administering to the needs of people. Some of the groups that met at West Federal are meeting here right now.

C: Can you name some of the groups that were meeting there that meet here now? Do you remember any names or do you know of any names?

S: A women's swimming class from McGuffey Center who would come to West Federal simply started coming here. The Beacon's Union meets here right now. The Sunday School Association meets here right now.

C: That's interesting because nobody ever pointed that out to me before.

As you said there was a lot of sentiment involved with the West Federal Branch YMCA. It was a place where many of the blacks felt that it was their own YMCA and there was a pride in that. There was a lot of concern in 1972 about the West Federal Branch being closed, which was expressed to me by everybody that I have spoken with that was involved with that

YMCA. Many of the blacks up there, for instance, didn't have a lot of money and a lot of the kids from the Westlake area were concerned that they would not have the transportation down here, or that they would be lost in the shuffle or things like that. Has that storm been weathered? Has the transition come off successfully in your opinion or not?

S: I think the transition has been very, very successful. Many of the fears that the blacks had just didn't materialize. The youngsters did manage to get here; they are here participating and they are having a ball. I get a kick out of seeing them. I got a kick out of a kid the other day. J. Fletcher, one of the youngsters who I saw grow up in the YMCA, was in Billy Ellis's Leaders Program; Billy Ellis had a Leader's Club. Here when he came to Central, he was such a good fellow down here that Central used him as a part-time employee. These are things that you like to see.

I think the transition went real well; and all those people who had those terrible fears, I think even they are convinced now that this is the better thing for all concerned.

C: Did you have those fears often?

S: I really didn't have any fears about it working. I felt all along that it could work, our being here together.

In order to have black children who can't afford to have a membership--belong to the YMCA--we have campaigners put something in to the till so that the black kids can continue to be members here.

END OF INTERVIEW