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In the above newspaper clipping, Sarah Elizabeth Fulton Heiney, right, is shown at a switchboard.

Sarah Elizabeth Fulton Heiney

Second mother to hundreds of young women

By JANET McNEIL HURLBERT
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Elizabeth Fulton Heiney (1883–1959) retired from the Williamsport YWCA in 1955. Much of what we know about her, including all of the quotations in this article, comes from undated newspaper clippings from the Williamsport Sun. One article, "Director Feted By Residence Women," celebrated her 24 years of working as housing director and "second mother" to hundreds of young women. The residents' farewell party consisted of refreshments and a gift of luggage. The YW Board also commemorated Heiney's retirement at their final board meeting of the season, held at the Women's Club.

Heiney, daughter of Robert and Ella Baker Fulton, grew up in the Montoursville area. In 1907, she married John Leroy Heiney, in a family ceremony at her parent's home. After a wedding breakfast, the couple, described by the newspaper as "very popular," left for their honeymoon in Hazelton.

Heiney mothered two children. When she was widowed at the age of 44, working outside the home became a necessity, and she sought employment at the YWCA in its new building at 815 W. Fourth St. First, she was assistant director of housing; five years later, she assumed the title of resident director.

A 'Jack of all motherly trades'

Heiney was a "Jack of all motherly trades," which included fixing Christmas morning breakfast for the women at the YW on the holiday and providing snacks for pajama parties. She scheduled public rooms for all YW activities as well as filling in at the switchboard when necessary.

"Mrs. Heiney is as much a part of the YW as its feminine atmosphere," according to a newspaper clipping.

YW residence committee

The YW residence committee minutes from the 1940s frequently cite Heiney's reporting on the number of women living at the facility — typically approximately 90, ranging in age from 18 to 40. In 1942, weekly rent was $3.50. The number of transients could total more than 500 per year.

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Shown is a portrait of Sarah Elizabeth Fulton Heiney, provided by her family.

In addition to student teachers from Penn State, Lock Haven and Mansfield, there were factory workers and secretaries. Sometimes women had experienced problems at home that necessitated their finding another place to live.

Heiney's position was central to one of the important missions of the YW — to provide resident and transient housing to the increasing number of women coming to the city for work and educational opportunities from surrounding small towns and farms. They needed safe, heated, supervised housing away from the other boarding and eating establishments in the area, which often were not considered respectable places for "nice"

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Second mother to hundreds of young women

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There was a special concern for young women who sought "protection and friendship;" it was believed that they should live under supervisors who could help in "meeting their first problems."

As a welcoming letter to new residents stated, "Mrs. Elizabeth Heiney is Residence Director. Always feel free to talk with her about your problems."

At monthly Monday meetings, Heiney and members of the residence committee considered mundane topics such as repair work, replacing curtains and bedspreads, designating someone to sell war savings stamps on each floor and whether mats were needed under plants.

Members determined that the YW would pay for magazine subscriptions to Reader's Digest, Newsweek, American Home and Good Housekeeping. The committee also recommended policy changes.

In 1945, the committee decided that only 10 percent of residents should be more than 60 years old because the YW was having to turn away too many younger women. They also agreed that no one could live in the YW longer than five years.

Heiney, described as "bright-eyed" and laughter-filled," also had to be tough. The schedules of the residents varied widely, with those who worked all night wanting to sleep during morning hours while others were getting up to go to day positions.

Controlling offensive giggling and other commotion at all hours was a big job. Additionally, curfew for residents was 1 a.m., and Heiney had to chase out boyfriends from the two large lounges on the main floor.

You make your job

In an interview, Heiney was quoted as saying, "The duties of a resident director are not glamorous. The person handling such a job doesn't attract much attention and isn't often applauded."

There were many tedious details, and sometimes Heiney had to work with individuals who made impossible requests. She prided herself on her ability to add a quick smile, a consistent pleasantness and a helpful attitude to every responsibility that defined her position. As a result of these attributes, she came to retirement with "scores and scores" of friends, having made herself a key member of the YWCA staff.

Family and life-long friends

Heiney's grandchildren, David Heiney and Dr. Lee Goodenow, called her "Gommy." They remember their grandmother's two-room apartment on the third floor of the YW, with a shared kitchen on a lower floor.

When the children would join her overnight, they might be the only ones swimming in the large heated pool or playing ball on the basketball court, under the watchful eye of their grandmother.

Second only to Heiney's love for her own children and grandchildren were her feelings for the women who had lived at the YW through the years. Christmas always was a special time because so many of "her girls" remembered her. She received hundreds of cards from all over the United States.

David Heiney said, after her retirement from the YW, his grandmother moved across the street to an apartment in the former Park Home, now Park Place. Her grandchildren do not remember that she ever used that gift of luggage for travel.

Heiney saw the YWCA through crucial years in its history. The national organization refers to these decades as the years of courage in meeting problems caused by the Depression, and the years of alertness to changing times and adaption of programs after World War II.

Heiney was not a founder of a humanitarian organization or a crusader for a cause. However, through her work and her kindness on a daily basis, she supported others — one woman at a time.

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