Historic Program Moments

The YMCA Youth and Government program was developed at a time when some of the defining questions of the 20th century were being answered. In many ways, Youth and Government not only served as a mirror of society, but also as a window into advances in diversity, equality, youth rights, and public policy that youth legislators would approve decades before they elected counterparts.

When youth legislator Barbara Striker called the Virginia YMCA Youth and Government Model General Assembly to order in April of 1948, it was the first time in state history that a woman had presided over the legislature. In 1949, Youth and Government delegates in Michigan elected Myron Wals, an African American student from Detroit, as Youth Governor – over 40 years before the election of the first African American Governor since Reconstruction in 1990.

The YMCA Youth and Government program has not just been a part of history – it has and continues to make it:

George H. Gallup

When Princeton University Professor John F. Sly became Chairman of the first National Youth and Government Sponsoring Committee, he recruited one of his colleagues, Dr. George H. Gallup, to serve with him. Dr. Gallup was the director of the American Institute for Public Opinion, and achieved notoriety for using his polling to accurately predict that Franklin Roosevelt would win the Presidency in 1936. The research firm that now bears his name, the Gallup Organization, has become one of the most recognized pollsters in the world.

In addition to serving on Sly’s Committee, Dr. Gallup used his American Institute for Public Opinion to help the YMCA Youth and Government programs in New Jersey, Maryland, and Pennsylvania conduct State Public Opinion Polls like the New Jersey Public Opinion Poll seen at right. The youth legislators in each program conducted the polls themselves, and used the findings to select bill topics for their Assembly legislation that were relevant to the needs of their communities and states.

Hawaiian Statehood

While every state program of YMCA Youth and Government has its own unique origin story, the story of the Hawaii program began before Hawaii was even a state. The program was founded during Hawaii’s transition from territory to statehood in 1950. While the actual Constitutional Convention for Hawaii was being held, 71 delegates from 53 Hi-Y and Hi-Y Clubs gathered for their own Model Constitutional Convention in the throne room of the Royal Iolani Palace. Their task was the same as the actual convention – to issue a constitution for the new state of Hawaii.

Although they were gathered in a royal palace that embodied Hawaii’s monarchial past, their responsibility was to help transition Hawaii to representative democracy – a responsibility that their generation would carry for years to come after the Model Constitutional Convention.

A decade later, Hawaii elected Eric Shiwaki from Kauai High School as Youth Governor in 1960. Shiwaki, a retired four-star general, serves as Secretary of Veterans Affairs for President Obama.

The 26th Amendment

At the 1968 Youth Governors Conference, President Lyndon B. Johnson surprised not only the Youth Governors but also the entire House of Representatives when he chose the conference as the venue to announce his endorsement of the 26th Amendment to lower the national voting age to 18. President Johnson delivered the same message to Congress later that week, and sent a copy of his speech along with a personal request that they support the amendment in their states.

It was no coincidence that the President chose the Youth Governors Conference to make his announcement. The original sponsor of the House Resolution calling for the 26th Amendment was Senator Jennings Randolph of West Virginia. Randolph was an avid YMCA Youth and Government supporter who had helped host the Youth Governors Conference for over a decade.

At the 1971 Youth Governors Conference, 3 years to the day that President Johnson announced his endorsement, Senator Randolph was being honored for his service to the program when word came during the conference that the Senate had voted to ratify the 26th Amendment. The Senator made his official announcement while accepting the award.

After decades of YMCA Youth and Government bills passed by youth legislators to lower the voting age, high school seniors in the program were now able to vote for the first time in history.

The Story of YMCA Youth and Government

When you share the story of Youth and Government, people will be surprised to hear that the Y is home to one of the largest youth civic engagement and model government programs in the world.

How did the Y – birthplace of basketball and home to swimming lessons, fitness centers, summer camps, and childcare – give rise to Youth and Government?

The answer lies in 3 key elements of YMCA history:

Boys Work

The YMCA was originally founded in 1844 as an organization for young men at the start of their careers (age 20 and older). As the Y expanded, so did demand from younger boys (ages 12–18) to join. Boys Work Departments, administered by Boys Work Secretaries (staff directors), were established to provide this new generation with a space and voice in the Y movement.

Older Boys Conferences

As boys became an increasingly larger portion of YMCA membership, a leader was needed to give them their own forums for sharing their Y experience with other boys. These forums – Older Boys Conferences – grew into some of the largest youth gatherings in the country.

Hi-Y (High School YMCAs)

The massive growth of Boys Work programs led many participants to bring the Y to their schools, resulting in the formation of High School YMCAs, or Hi-Y Clubs, across the country. By the 1930s, Hi-Y was one of the largest student organizations in the United States. The transition to school-based YMCA clubs also brought about the creation of Tri-Hi-Y – the girls version of Hi-Y – and moved the Y away from its male-only roots.

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OUR STORY  
YMCA YOUTH AND GOVERNMENT  
DEMOCRACY MUST BE LEARNED BY EACH GENERATION

The YMCA | 1844
The Young Men’s Christian Association was founded on June 6, 1844 in London, England by 22-year-old George Williams.

YMCA Boys Work | 1869
To provide YMCA activities for boys ages 12-18, the first Boys Work Department was founded by William Horace Whipple in Salem, MA on April 26, 1869.

Boys Work Secretaries | 1886
Ellen Brown becomes the first employed Boys Work Secretary (Program Director), working for the YMCA in Buffalo, NY.

Older Boys Conferences | 1891
As Boys Work grew, many asked if boys should be represented at State YMCA Conferences. W.F. Moore, Boys Work Secretary in Everett, MA, proposed a conference solely for boys, run by boys. On January 28, 1891 the 1st Older Boys Conference was held for YMCA boys in Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

Hi-Y Assembly at New York Older Boys Conference | 1936
After meeting with boy leaders who wanted the results of their Older Boys Conference discussions to be heard by “people who can do something about them,” Clement A. “Pete” Duran, Boys Work Secretary for the Albany YMCA, sought and received permission to hold the conference at the State Capitol from December 11-13, 1936. Hi-Y Clubs selected representatives to debate and pass bills as part of the Hi-Y Assembly – the first YMCA Youth and Government Assembly.

First Youth Governor | 1938
When Duran accepted a new position for the YMCA in Buffalo, NY. Duran’s idea gained national support at Princeton University, where Professor John F. Sly chaired the first National Hi-Y and Government Committee, developed training resources, and held a National YMCA Youth and Government Extension Conference for new states from April 20-21, 1944.

National Conference of Boy Governors | 1949
The first YMCA National Conference of Boy Governors was held in Washington, DC from June 16-19, 1949, bringing together Youth Governors and leaders from 19 states. The agenda included sessions with Prof. Sly, Clement Duran, and President Harry Truman.

National Youth and Government Assembly | 1952
In 1952, the first National Youth and Government Assembly was held as part of the National Hi-Y & Tri-Hi-Y Council in Washington, DC.

YMCA Youth Governors Conference | 1962
A decade passed before the Reader’s Digest Foundation helped sponsor the 2nd Youth Governors Conference in 1962 in Washington, DC, where the conference has been held each year since. 36 states were represented.

YMCA Conference on National Affairs | 1968
After Alabama delegate Michal Hart proposed a new national Youth and Government conference, William C. Chandler of the Montgomery YMCA established the Conference on National Affairs (CONA). 7 states sent delegations to the first conference in 1968 in Stone Mountain, GA.

YMCA College Youth In Government | 2012
In March of 2012, college students from across the country convened a Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, PA to found the YMCA College Youth In Government program.

YMCA National Judicial Competition | 2012
In July of 2012, the first YMCA National Judicial Competition was held in Chicago, IL.

Hi-Y | 1889
Following earlier attempts at school-based YMCA clubs in clubs in Iowa and Ann Arbor, MI, the first High School YMCA was founded by D.F. Shirk at Dickinson County High School in Chapman, KS in 1889. The name “Hi-Y” was first used and adopted in 1911 by the High School YMCA in Pittsfield, MA.

National Hi-Y Fellowship | 1932
In 1932, the National Hi-Y Fellowship was created to help charter, register, and organize Hi-Y Clubs across the country.

National Hi-Y Congress | 1936
In 1936, the 1st National Hi-Y Congress was held in Berea, KY to allow Hi-Y members to propose and discuss policies, resources, and initiatives for the National Hi-Y Fellowship.