

How The Senior Women's Club Came To Be

In 1992 Penny Kleene became a member of The Community House Volunteer Advisory Committee and subsequently was asked to assume responsibility for a project. Since there had been occasional inquiries about a Senior Women's Club in Birmingham, it was decided that she would form and chair a committee to explore the potential for the development of such a group. The committee consisted of nine members, some having expressed an interest in the project and others who were recommended by Chris Nightingale, the liaison to The Community House. The committee, chaired by Penny Kleene, consisted of Rickey Butzel, Teresa Byrne, Fran Carson, Phyllis Cartwright, Kay Erwin, Ann Phelan, Grace Smith and Shirley Watson. Two members of the successful Senior Men's Club were invited to join the committee for a meeting to share their structure and experiences. They further assisted by making their bylaws available for reference.

Although the bylaws of the Senior Men's Club were used as a guideline, there were specific differences made during the formation of the bylaws for the Senior Women's Club. While the men had an age requirement of 65 and retired, the women decided on a minimum age of 55 to allow for a more active group with the potential for a longer membership. Another change noted was that men required their members to reside within the Birmingham School District boundaries. The SWC, however, opened their membership to all women within the age limit regardless of area of residency. The rationale was to allow members who had been active at The Community House for many years but were selling their homes to move to adjacent communities the privilege of continuing their membership indefinitely. This idea was welcomed by The Community House administration because it would bring in new people and it also coincided with their current active transition from The *Birmingham* Community House to The Community House.

Throughout the organizational stages of The Senior Women's Club, The Community House was fully supportive and provided meeting space, office services free of charge and other needs as they arose. With minimal publicity, mostly by word of mouth, the committee gave a coffee meeting to ascertain interest. Since there were no funds available to them at the time, committee members provided refreshments and The Community House offered set-up and coffee. Approximately 75 women were in attendance and were given questionnaires to fill out as a starter mailing list and to determine areas of interest, times of availability, etc. With that positive demonstration of interest, the committee proceeded to finalize the bylaws and presented a proposal to The Community House Board of Directors.

On December 31, 1992 an article appeared in the Observer-Eccentric informing the public that The Community House had plans to form a senior women's club for women over 55, similar to the Senior Men's Club which was already in place. In order to test the increasing interest, the committee decided to have a tea. Invitations to attend an informational tea on January 5, 1993 were mailed to a 1992 mailing list of prospective members, and an article appeared in the O/E. Of course, there was much publicity by word-of-mouth because those who had attended the coffee meeting were spreading the news to their friends. Preparations were made for 100, with food again being provided by the committee and coffee, tea and set-ups by The Community House. When the day of the tea arrived, everyone was totally overwhelmed as the guests kept arriving for a total of more than 300.

At this point, Gale Colwell, Community House director, decided that women on their mailing list of contributors/benefactors should also be made aware of the formation of the group and applications were sent to them as well. The Community House absorbed all mailing costs. As the new board was formed, it was agreed that members of the steering committee should assume active roles and enlist other qualified people to assist in providing continuity and support to this new organization. As a result, Phyllis Cartwright was named president; Fran Carson, treasurer; Rickey Butzel chaired the bylaws committee, and Kay Erwin, Ann Phelan and Penny Kleene served in an advisory capacity. On January 19, 1993 The Community House Board of Directors approved the formation of The Community House Senior Women's Club.

The Community House mailed a letter with an application to the aforementioned list of prospective members. The date of February 24 was chosen as the deadline for TCH to receive applications for membership. As the new board swung into motion, applications began to literally pour in, and the response was overwhelming. Applications were accepted for 1,130 members who made the deadline date. The rest of the applicants were placed on a waiting list. It was decided the membership should be closed, at least temporarily, to reassess and reevaluate the situation. It was certainly obvious that a community need had been fulfilled by the formation of The Community House Senior Women's Club in 1993.

The first membership meeting of TCHSWC was held on April 20, 1993 at TCH. In 2004 a bylaw was changed by the SWC to lower the age of membership from 55 to 50—the new age for “senior.” It is now January 2009, and The Community House Senior Women's Club continues to be an integral part of our community and The Community House. The membership has dropped substantially over the past 16 years. However, our focus remains on providing fellowship, programs and activities for our membership. The annual SWC Founders' Tea is held on the second Tuesday during May and is a highlight of our yearly meetings. On that day we honor the SWC Founders and our past presidents. We strive to continue upholding the high standards set forth by the Steering Committee and first Board of Directors—they would be proud!

Researched and written by Penny Kleene, July 1999

Researched and edited by Maxine Smiley, January 2009

