

EDMA BAYOUTH

Edma Bayouth's name is not only linked to that of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in Lebanon. It also recalls Lebanese social work at the stage when it tried to evolve into an organized or systematic activity based on study, inquiry, cooperation and dedication, four characteristics adopted by this militant woman who gave to extensive social work more than fifty years of her life and has become so identified with it that now, after two years of retirement, she maintains contact with her work, moved by the same enthusiasm that characterized her when she started it at the age of twenty.

Q: How did your interest in social work develop?

A: When I was a student in Sidon Girls' School, I was interested in helping the Armenian refugees and orphans who came to Lebanon after World War I. Later, when I joined the YWCA in Beirut to study secretarial work, I dedicated my free time to voluntary social work, when one day, Ruth Woodsmall, the director of the YWCA in the Middle East, at the time, asked me to conduct a study on the social institutions in Lebanon. During my investigations I became acquainted with the different social organizations that were active at the time, and realized how miserable the conditions of working girls and children were.

Q: When was the YWCA founded? Why?

A: In 1920, James Nicol, the director of the American Red Cross in Beirut, suggested the foundation of a YWCA center, similar to the one he visited in Istanbul. Later, two secretaries from the YWCA in Istanbul, Miss Morris and Miss Lack, came to Beirut to establish the center. James Nicol, then turned Jessy Taylor Memorial School into a center of activities for the YWCA. Miss Morris and Miss Lack coordinated with a local committee to organize a YWCA program which would meet the educational, recreational and spiritual needs of women.

The objectives of the YWCA were to help women grow in the knowledge and love of God, to involve a larger number of Lebanese women in active participation in the improvement of the status of women, and in arousing their interest in the social problems in Lebanon.

Q: What are some of the activities and accomplishments of the YWCA that you helped bring to light?

A: In 1930, after the study on the conditions of working girls and children was completed, the government assigned us as inspectors. A national committee, consisting of various groups and organizations, was set up after the initiation of "Child Labor Week," during which legislative, educational and nutritional needs and problems were discussed. The outcome was the initiation of a program



that aimed at:

- o Preventing child labor and sending young working children to school, but unfortunately, mothers got their children out of the school and sent them back to work.
- o Starting nutrition camps, where the working children were gathered, given a good medical examination and treatment for parasites, malnutrition and anemia.
- o Initiating night school courses for working girls and children in the industrial centers, where volunteers from the American University of Beirut used to teach them.

The YWCA was also involved in:

- o Providing special training for girls and women that enables them to find decent jobs.
- o Establishing an employment office.
- o Providing shelter, food and medication for war refugees.
- o Establishing a general committee that investigates the problems of young maids in Lebanon.

Q: What activities are dearest to you?

A: Working with teenage girl-reserves who grew into adult leaders through the years.

- o Watching the factory girls, who came to the night schools, develop new healthy attitudes towards work, employers, and better health habits, and their complete and positive response to the program and the dedicated staff of the YWCA.
- o Summer camps, especially at Dhour Shweir, where the girls were given the opportunity to be creative in all aspects.
- o Nutrition camps where we could see and feel the improved health condition of the poor children. Even their parents could not recognize them after they returned from the camps.

Q: What kind of training does the YWCA provide for its students?

A: Secretarial studies, interior design, home

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economics, hair dressing, knitting, dress making), adult classes of flower arrangement, languages, bridge. The YWCA also provides board and lodging for working women as well as day care centers.

Q: What urged the women to go to the YWCA to learn 40 years ago?

A: Those women found new alternatives to raising a family. Most of them graduated from high school and wanted to pursue a career. The YWCA provided them with new vocational training other than teaching and nursing. Moreover, women were already leaving their homes and seeking jobs in factories.

Q: How would you compare the Lebanese women of today with women 40 years ago?

A: In general, women nowadays, are more extravagant and like to attract attention and show off more than before. They spend a lot of money on their appearance, when there are more pressing needs, especially under the present conditions. Nonetheless, the Lebanese women have contributed to the financial stability of the family during the crisis. Cottage industry,

trading and opening fashion shops (which are mostly owned by women) are some of the means which the Lebanese women have used to help generate income and participate in stabilizing the Lebanese economy.

Q: What are your wishes and hopes for the YWCA?

A: I hope that the YWCA would re-establish its work with the teenagers and youth along with its present vocational training. I know that it would be coming soon due to its effective and dedicated leadership.

Now, after two years of retirement, Edma Bayouth still feels the urge to go out and help people. Different groups are getting in touch with her to re-organize an adult literacy program.

The depth of her experience with people and the richness of her social activities even before she became the director of the YWCA in Lebanon, assert the importance and fruitfulness of organized social work if it is carried out with faith and dedication.

Interview by Najla Husni (IWSAW)