

## YMCA, YWCA still teaching values

By MICHAEL MCHALE/Lincoln Journal Star

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Jim Loos remembers the scene well:

A player struck out during a youth baseball game, and after returning to the dugout a teammate began mocking him.

Loos, a local YMCA youth sports coach, explained the incident at the next practice and had everyone do extra laps.

“I never named him by name, because that’s not appropriate at this age,” Loos said. “But kids aren’t dumb.”

More than a century after it was founded, the Young Men's Christian Association still tries to teach values. And so does the Young Women’s Christian Association.

The organizations are no longer gender specific or strictly Christian, but character development is still a primary focus.

Today, the goal is to teach a variety of traits everyone can use. The YMCA, for instance, has adopted four core values believed to be shared by many religions: caring, respect, responsibility and honesty. Its mission is “to put Christian principles into practice through programs that build a healthy spirit, mind and body for all.”

“We still recognize that we were founded on Christian values,” said Barbara Bettin, president of the Lincoln YMCA. “But how we express those values is different ... The ‘C’ is not about theology anymore.”

The YWCA’s mission is to “empower women and eliminate racism.”

Both organizations offer programs for men and women of all ages and faiths.

The groups emerged with a Bible and some people in the mid-1800s, serving as Christian escapes in London during the Industrial Revolution. Soon they developed branches around the world, and standards for membership quickly broadened.

In 1915, the YWCA held the first interracial conference in the South in Louisville, Ky. And after World War II, more than 66 percent of YMCAs were admitting women, putting more emphasis on families than religion and gender. By the 1990s, both had missions that tried to be inclusive and value-based.

Today, both carry out their goals through a number of programs.

Before youth sport seasons begin at the YMCA, new coaches attend a mandatory meeting about values and character. Troy Pekas, senior director of sports at the Lincoln YMCA, said the tradition began three years ago.

“Turns out not everyone reads the manual every time,” he said.

If sportsmanship is problem during a game — either among participants or parents — referees are taught to discuss proper conduct. If the problem persists, the administration will provide help.

Loos and his youth sports teams make a point to avoid trouble. The coach said he emphasizes teamwork and respect to his fourth-grade players. He wants participants to be cordial to opposing coaches, teams and officials.

But while caring for neighbors is a Christian principle, Loos avoids talking about religion during practice.

“I teach a K-5 fellowship group,” he said, “and these are the same values we’re teaching in the fellowship. But we have to be careful here. We don’t want to exclude anyone.”

The Lincoln YMCA’s Camp Kitaki goes a step further. The summer program offers a morning chapel service and a prayer at every meal. Bibles are not used during discussions, Camp Kitaki Director Chris Klingenberg

said, but sometimes camp leaders review biblical stories. Other times they simply perform skits about character.

No one is required to attend the services, he said. In fact, there are several Muslim campers who hang out with staff members during chapel sessions. And some of the camp leaders are Jewish.

Fellowship doesn't require religious uniformity.

"Our international staff, they respect our flag-raising," Klingenberg said. "But they don't necessarily say The Pledge of Allegiance."

The idea is to teach values, not religion. By equipping youth with proper character traits, the more likely they will strive to make the right choices.

"One big thing different with the Y," Klingenberg said, "is that we focus on conveying Christian values rather than preaching the Bible."

In recent years, the YMCA has adopted some developmental assets used by many schools and organizations around the country. There are 40 in all, and among other things they include providing service to others and building more adult relationships with children.

The Lincoln YMCA uses more than half of them in its local programs.

"Character development is what makes the Y different and special," Bettin said. "We're concerned about the whole child — through sports, exercise and classes — and we provide all the tools to help families and kids develop."

The YWCA has a similar goal, but its mission is more focused on providing social services to women and children. The association offers SMART Club classes (Science, Math and Related Technologies) for girls in fourth through sixth grade.

And along with a multicultural child-development center, it has a dance academy and swimming and fitness programs. For those who can't afford the dance academy, the YWCA offers scholarships and awards.

"These programs are among programs offered by the YW which touch the lives of those who are traditionally underserved," said Ginny Gross, director of education and outreach at the Lincoln YWCA, "or whose needs fall outside of the services traditionally provided by social service entities."

Outreach and services are more prominent than religion. But the organization still recognizes its roots.

"YWCA's throughout the world were founded as an outgrowth of Christian values," Gross said. "Those values are shared by many faith communities. Today, we relish the religious diversity found among our program participants and encourage the sharing of all family and faith traditions."

Back on the athletic fields, Loos will continue to coach at the YMCA, at least for a little while. When his son gets older and outgrows youth sports, Loos said, he'll probably take a break.

Until then, his kids play as a team and respect their opponents.

Values are a big deal where they're playing.

"It's literally everything we do," Bettin said. "It's a measuring stick for us."

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