

The YMCA Continues To Provide Core Community Service

by Kurt Woock

Writer for and on behalf of the City of Glendale

The YMCA and Denver go back, way back. The organization, which is woven into the fabric of the American culture from coast to coast, was here in Denver when Colorado became a state in 1876. The first Y opened in 1844 in London, where its 11 founding members intended to assist young men “seeking escape from the hazards of life on the streets.” Less than a decade later it arrived in Boston, and its footprint, and influence, spread quickly. It helped men who were moving from rural areas to quickly growing American cities — a much needed resource in the new railroad city at the gateway of the Rockies whose population was going through the roof. Today, the *Denver YMCA* has 68,000 members, which is enough people to be Denver’s seventh largest suburb. The Y’s role in Denver has changed a lot since those early frontier days, but its mission remains.

Jim Hiner is a cornerstone of Denver’s YMCA history. He grew up in the area and was active at the Y throughout high school and college. In 1981, after graduating from college, Hiner began his first job, at the Lakewood branch of the Y. Since then, he’s worked in various capacities at the YMCAs in Boulder, Longmont, and Arlington, Texas. In 2006, Hiner became CEO of the entire metro Denver area.

Denver has changed since Hiner began in 1981. Denver has had nearly three decades of growth, adding more than 200,000 people since 1990. Counterintuitively, the demand for the Y’s physical presence — gyms, pools, workout equipment — has actually declined, despite the boom. Hiner explained, “The Denver-Boulder area has been the number one market in the country for fitness centers, health clubs, and outdoor recreation.” In other words, while the population grew, the number of places to work out grew even more quickly. And that’s just part of it. Hiner added, “But what really affected our numbers were public rec centers. Because of the tax base, those centers typically could charge less for services.” The combination of great public spaces, an increase in the number and types of private facilities, and the advent of publicly-funded fitness facilities led to decreasing usage of YMCA buildings. Although it’s a nonprofit, the YMCA still needs money to operate. Declining membership led to declining revenue, which meant that older facilities didn’t have the funds needed to upgrade their buildings and equipment in order to compete with the alternatives that were wooing away the Y’s members to begin with. A classic negative feedback loop.

But an organization doesn’t stick around for a century and a half by being unwilling to adapt to changing circumstances. Hiner said that Y leaders recognized that their best asset wasn’t a gym or a weight room; it was the quality and experience of YMCA personnel. “So there was a refocus in the mid-’90s on programming,” Hiner said. “That’s what we’re good at. We really got back to serving communities.” The shift to programming meant thinking outside the walls of its facilities. “Our core youth programs — aquatics, childcare, youth sports, camping — those are still our core programs,” Hiner said. “But we’ve branched out to delivering services in areas that typically are underfunded.” This means health and wellness initiatives like diabetes prevention, programs that promote nutrition for kids. It means going out into the communities and finding people instead of waiting for people in the community to find them.

That shift to service-based service has worked. And it’s developed even more in the decade since Hiner took over as CEO. The Y, with its seasoned staff of leaders who know how to run successful programming, provides the staff for many places that don’t have the familiar “Y” logo on the building. A homeowners association might build a workout center for its residents,



Photo by Justin Purdy

The Annual Denver YMCA Summer Camp goes to Infinity Park for a rugby clinic with the Glendale Raptors and thousands of kids enjoy the one-of-a-kind programming.

and to staff it they’ll hire the Y. YMCA staff manage 24 outdoor pools in the Denver area. The *Glendale Sports Center*, for example, is a low-cost, municipally-owned facility run by Y staff.

In addition to its traditional role of delivering physical education services to children, especially its well known aquatic lessons, the Denver YMCA has also been successful in encouraging young people

to become active in government with its aptly named *Youth In Government* program. Students spend three months learning about how laws and government shape people’s lives. At the end, students have a mock legislative session at the Colorado State Capitol, where they write bills, lobby, debate, and vote, using the real House, Senate, and committee rooms. Teen after-school programs, arts programs, and more add to the Y’s diverse programming. And, despite the move away from relying completely on its own facilities, it does still operate six successful Y sites throughout the metro area. In fact, Hiner said a major remodel for the downtown Y is in the fundraising phase. They’ve raised more than half of the \$3 million goal for the project, which will add space in a currently unfinished basement and upgrade the gym, locker rooms, and lobby in the 110-year-old building.

The Y has ensured that it will continue to provide important community services for years to come by changing with the times. The Y has also continued this long because of its unwillingness to change its core mission: “I think the Y exists to serve the community in whatever way we can,” Hines said. “We tend to reach out where we can provide leadership. We solve problems in the community. That’s what we’re ultimately about.”

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