

# History of the Girls Inc. of Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on November 16, 2010)

To understand Girls Inc. of Oak Ridge we must first understand the national organization known as Girls Incorporated. This "movement" started in 1864 in Waterbury, Connecticut. The Industrial Revolution was well underway and a new working class made up of young women from rural communities was forming. The women who had migrated to the cities in search of job opportunities in textile mills and factories made up this emerging work force.

The programs provided by this fledgling effort were targeted toward young working women and also included their daughters. Wages were extremely low and these working women had no place to gather for recreation and little money to spend on other than essentials. The homelike atmosphere of the meeting places drew the women and their daughters as a safe refuge for relaxation.

Girls Incorporated centers were warm friendly places where girls could come to get away from the daily routine of their work environments and could, for a time, forget their troubles that caused them to have to work at such hard jobs for so little wages. This initiative lasted throughout the depression and well into the 1930's.

The next stage in the evolution of "Girls" organizations resulted when Dora Dodge, Executive Director of the Worcester, Massachusetts affiliate of Girls Incorporated, published an article in a national magazine that pointed to the growing needs of girls in the congested areas of American cities. This struck a note with other "Girls" organizations in surrounding communities in the New England area where these young women had come to work.

For the next ten years cooperative efforts among the communities resulted in strengthening all the "Girls" organizations. Finally, the movement gained enough momentum that 19 interested organizations met in Springfield, Massachusetts on May 18, 1945 to form Girls Clubs of America.

However, the Girls Incorporated ideals and organization never actually or completely moved into the "Girls Clubs of America." In 1990, the Boys Clubs of America joined with the Girls Clubs of America to form Boys and Girls Clubs of America. Yet, even then the Girls Incorporated maintained a separate identity.

The programs for girls offered by Girls Clubs of America and later by Boys and Girls Clubs of America tended to focus on homemaking, cooking and sewing. This emphasis was not inclusive of the needs and issues facing young girls, thus the Girls Inc. was led to reexamine its original mission in terms of the new era and the evolving needs and issues facing young girls.

In 1974, the Girls Inc. organization, cognizant of the emerging Civil Rights movement, the women's movement, the flood of women entering the workforce and the adolescent turbulence of the time, began to focus on preparing a new generation of young girls for a varied and wide ranging adulthood far different from previous generations. That realization resulted in dramatic changes in Girls Inc.

Because of this increased awareness of needs and issues facing girls and young women, Girls Inc. decided to take on the responsibility of increasing the knowledge about girls and, through various conferences, punctuated the need for targeted programs for girls. This approach transformed Girls Inc.

Quickly, the Girls Inc. became multifaceted. After school programs took on entirely different focus areas. The organization became a more scholarly organization that pursues the most pressing issues girls face. Research efforts for new techniques and program development are guided by these pressing issues.

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Education became the driving force. Innovative programs that help girls develop strategies for leading successful, independent and complete lives became the motivating goals. One element that is all-encompassing is the Girls Inc. philosophy, ***To inspire all girls to be strong, smart and bold and to be recognized as the premier organization that helps all girls to realize their potential and exercise their rights.***

It is within this setting of evolution of "Girls" organizations and programs that our own Girls Club, later to become "Girls Inc." of Oak Ridge was formed. It was in the mid 1970's when a major change took place in Oak Ridge relative to girls programs. The "Girls Club of Oak Ridge" was formed. This rather small effort while seemingly insignificant would come to be a major force in the lives of young girls in Oak Ridge..

The beginning of Girls Inc. (then known as the Girls Club of Oak Ridge) took place at the Highland View Elementary School building that was just beginning to be occupied by the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. In 1976, this newly formed organization had as its primary mission to provide sports programs for young girls in Oak Ridge.

An after-school program was added to the Girls Club of Oak Ridge program in 1977. In 1978, the organization successfully became a United Way agency. A summer camp program was added in 1979. The new invigorated organization for young girls in Oak Ridge was off to a really good start.

In 1986, Anne Sides, Executive Director of the Girls Club of Oak Ridge, along with Roberta Sommerfeld and Joyce Morris, formed a steering committee to develop an auxiliary organization for Girls Club of Oak Ridge. This auxiliary later became known as Crown monarch. Their member's efforts continue to provide volunteer and financial support for the current Girls Inc. programs today.

In 1990, the Girls Club of Oak Ridge name was changed to Girls Inc. of Oak Ridge to reflect their new affiliation with the national organization known as "Girls Inc." This seemingly small name change was really a major shift of focus and energy.

We will look more closely at the history of the Girls Inc. organization since 1990 in upcoming installments of Historically Speaking. Today's Girls Inc. located at 1798 Oak Ridge Turnpike and expanding into the vacated National Guard Amory property is a vibrant organization serving girls in Oak Ridge and Anderson County.

Girls Inc is well known for its excellent sports programs that include softball, basketball and flag football. After school programs are provided throughout the school year. Tutoring and mentoring are provided. Summer camps, educational field trips, specialty camps, swimming and other fun activities are routinely provided.

Nationally accredited programs that provide important skills such as economics, science and technology are regular elements in the Girls Inc. model. Key educational and sports programs are primary elements in the successful Girls Inc. program for young girls.

Please help identify the young girls in the photo of a 1978 Softball Team of the Girls Club of Oak Ridge (later to become the Girls Inc.) who have not been named in the caption.

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Standing: (L) Coach (?); (R) Coach Donna Azzi  
Front Row (L-R) (name?), Julie Smallridge, (name?), (name?), Kristen Jones, (name?), (name?),  
Jennifer Azzi  
Back Row (L-R) Dee Dee Curry, Donna Cates, Shannon Carleton, Suzanne Azzi, Beth Lebow, Molly  
Crisp, (name?)