

Girls Inc. of Oak Ridge evolves and forms the Crown Monarch Auxiliary

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on November 23, 2010)

Thanks to the readers who contacted me with the names of the people in the early photograph of the girls' softball team. The feedback was immediate and enthusiastic.

As we continue looking at the history of Girls Inc. I want to feature what I feel has been some key moves and the formation of an auxiliary, a key support organization. You will also come to realize the many years of dedicated service by some individuals. Later I hope to bring you the perspective of the Executive Director and maybe some reflections of prior directors. Let's now look at some aspects of the evolution of Girls Inc.

Over the years, Girls Club of Oak Ridge, which became Girls Incorporated of Oak Ridge in 1990, has occupied a number of facilities. Since the early years in the Highland View Elementary School building beginning in 1976 then occupied by the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, several other facilities have been used.

Roberta Sommerfeld, long time board member, 1980 – 1996, and former Executive Director, 1980 – 1987, as well as a founder of the Crown Monarch Women's Auxiliary in 1988, recalls the locations as, "Our accommodations at the school [Highland View Elementary School] were too small, and we were given the opportunity to rent space at the Oak Ridge Civic Center."

Roberta continued, "This was an ideal location as the after school program could expand and enjoyed the use of the swimming pool on Wednesdays, as well as the outdoor equipment. " She went on to say that the after school program grew to 40 girls each afternoon.

She recalls the next location as a joint venture with the Young Women's Christian Association to build a joint building on the property the YWCA had secured from the city. After a few years of sharing the facility, the Girls Inc. was asked to move to make room for an expansion of the Y's programs.

The Fraternal Order of Police building was the next location and served from 1995 - 2000 until the organization moved into its present location at 1798 Oak Ridge Turnpike in July, 2000. Since that proud day when Girls Inc. finally had their very own facility, the stability of that decision has enabled the organization to plan for the future with an added degree of certainty and assurance.

They have even added the purchase of the National Guard Armory site in 2008 and, according to Terry Domm, another long term board member and officer, are "currently addressing the many challenges faced when attempting to turn this 1950's era facility and adjacent site into the expanded campus envisioned." I have no doubt they will accomplish this goal as they have so many others.

While Girls Inc. was renting facilities, they were also constructing ball fields, first at Lasalle Park. The bleachers remain there today and are still in use. Then a softball field was built on the former tennis court site of their present location and opened on May 26, 1994. They had acquired the site in 1992 and their first endeavor was to build the sports field.

Terry Domm said, "This was not just a celebration of completion of the field, but also a recognition of amazing community support and involvement coming together to accomplish a daunting task. There had been many obstacles to overcome in turning this dream into reality: acquiring the property; rezoning; resolving the mercury contamination issue of property along East Fork Poplar Creek; gaining board of Zoning Appeals approval for intended use; and obtaining utility easements."

While Girls Inc. has moved a number of times and used several facilities over the years, one relationship has remained constant and favorable. According to Domm, "Another long standing association that has and continues to be most beneficial is that with The Boys Club of Oak Ridge. Girls Inc. has been allowed to use their gymnasium on Saturdays and Sundays for the 'Biddy Ball' basketball program."

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One of the most significant decisions made by the most successful organization for girls, was the determination to form a women's auxiliary. Here is the story of how that decision came about and was implemented as told by the person who initiated the effort, Roberta Sommerfeld.

Roberta said, "On a visit to the Girls Club of Sarasota in February 1983, [when she was executive director of Girls Club of Oak Ridge], I met Sherry Watts, founder and leader of Coquille, the highly successful auxiliary of the Sarasota club." Roberta realized that a women's auxiliary was something the Oak Ridge could use.

This dream of Roberta's did not happen right away, but on June 28, 1988, Sherry Watts came to Oak Ridge and meet with Anne Sides, then Executive director of Girls Club of Oak Ridge, Roberta and Joyce Morris. From this initial meeting agreement was reached that such an auxiliary might just be possible in Oak Ridge. So, Roberta and others now began to seek commitment and began the long work of formation.

A steering committee was formed and met on July 11, 1988, consisted of Linda Swigert, chair, Pat Coffey, Judy Mason, Joyce Morris, Pat Smith, Roberta Sommerfeld, Judy Stazer, Joyce Upchurch and Ashlyn Whisnant. Roberta's dream of forming an auxiliary was beginning to be fulfilled, but it would take additional years and hard work by many others to complete all the necessary steps to form a successful auxiliary.

On September 13, 1988, the auxiliary was chartered by the state, bylaws adopted and potential officers identified. At the membership tea on September 25, 1988, at the home of Joyce Upchurch, the formal Monarch Auxiliary was realized.

What Roberta Sommerfeld had seen five years earlier at Sarasota was now in place as the Crown Monarch Women's Auxiliary. Its primary purpose was to support Girls Inc. of Oak Ridge. Over the next 20 plus years a substantial \$166,500 has been contributed.

Two fundraisers, an autumn balsam wreath sale; and a fashion show and luncheon are held annually. Members of the auxiliary serve as Wednesday office assistants, volunteer as tutors and as book club readers. Additionally, they help run a concession stand at sports activities. Crown Monarch members provide a Halloween-themed party, a Christmas party, and a Spring-fling party.

As an indicator of the effectiveness of the Crown Monarch Auxiliary, the main sign for Girls Inc. has an expression of thanks for support on the marquee of the sign. The present location of Girls Inc. meets all the requirements for a full-fledged program and the plans for the future are to make that location even more effective.

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Thanks to the Crown Monarch Auxiliary for support provided Girls Inc.



Present home of Girls Inc. at 1798 Oak Ridge Turnpike where the former Jefferson Tennis Courts once stood