

COLUMN: Woman's City Club shows how much a group of determined women can accomplish over 100 years

'You've got to be unafraid.'

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CINCINNATI – When I grow up, I want to be the [Woman's City Club of Greater Cincinnati](http://womanscityclub.org/) (<http://womanscityclub.org/>).

Sure, I'm already 47 years old. And, yes, it's difficult for one person to be a whole club. But before you judge my new goal too harshly, consider this:

- The Woman's City Club started in 1915 – before women even had the right to vote – because homemakers here wanted to make a difference in their community. A newspaper ad drew about 200 founding members.
- During its 100-year history of rabble rousing, the club has impacted nearly every facet of the community, from city planning, to better housing to race relations and hillside preservation.
- The club continues its advocacy today, pushing for increases in the minimum wage to help low-income, working parents earn enough money to support their families.
- Plus, Marian Spencer is a member and former president. And she has to be the coolest 94-and-a-half-year-old woman I have ever interviewed.

The club has some big events planned to mark its 100th birthday. Its [Centennial Celebration](http://womanscityclub.org/programs/centennial/) (<http://womanscityclub.org/programs/centennial/>) will start with a reception at 5:30 p.m. March 6 at the Hilton Cincinnati Netherland Plaza. There will be music by MUSE, Cincinnati's Women's Choir, and a performance by youth from the Elementz Urban Arts Center.

The club also is bringing [Mariel Hemingway to town as its national speaker for a talk at 7:30 p.m.](http://womanscityclub.org/programs/national-speaker-forum/)

[April 23 \(http://womanscityclub.org/programs/national-speaker-forum/\)](http://womanscityclub.org/programs/national-speaker-forum/) at the Music Hall

Ballroom in Over the Rhine

Three long-time members – current club President Susan Noonan, Spencer and Dot Christenson, who also is a former president of the group – came to WCPO to talk about those events and the impact the club has had over the years.

A Quiet Force

I've been a reporter in Cincinnati for nearly 19 years now, but I knew very little about Woman's City Club.

The organization has been a quiet force from its start.

It fought against city government corruption during the "Boss Cox" days, took the lead in founding the Cincinnati City Planning Commission in 1915 and the Better Housing League in 1918.

The group's quest for better housing started with a door-to-door survey in the West End where the club's members found deplorable conditions and, Spencer said, 80,000 outside toilets.

Cincinnati Womens Club president Susan Noonan, Marian Spencer and Dot Christenson talk about the impact the club has had over the years as they celebrate its 100 years of existence. Emily Maxwell | WCPO

"The club was concerned initially with health and housing issues," Christenson said. "Those were considered 'safe' because they were women's issues."

The club's impact eventually spread beyond those issues, though.

The late Agnes Seasongood was a vocal leader in the group when her husband, Murray Seasongood, was the first Charterite mayor of Cincinnati.

"Before women were in government and had the power to do anything, Agnes would go home at night and say to Murray in bed, 'This needs to be fixed,'" said Noonan, who became a member of the club in the late '80s.

The next day, the mayor would go to City Hall and direct staff to fix what his wife told him was broken.

"Agnes called it their pillow talk," Noonan said with a smile.

Christenson joined the club in 1971 after the public schools closed all kindergartens mid-year because of a budget emergency. Other groups were organizing private kindergartens to compensate.

But the group in her Clifton neighborhood told her that only students who could afford to pay would be allowed to attend. Christenson started looking for an organization that would demand that community kindergartens be open to students from poor families.

"I went to a group that could respond to what I considered an immediate crisis," Christenson said. "They were supportive and went to neighborhood councils and said, if you're going to open a kindergarten, it has to be for every child."

The effort was successful in Clifton, she said, and poor, black students in the neighborhood were able to attend.

By that time, the Woman's City Club had a long tradition of advocating for civil rights.

Its members had stood alongside Spencer when she fought to integrate Coney Island amusement park.

Spencer's quest began in the early 1950s when her kids saw an advertisement for a children's day at the park and asked if they could go.

When Spencer called Coney Island to ask, she told the young woman who answered the phone, "We are Negroes."

The young woman said they would not be welcome and added sheepishly, "I don't make the rules."

"I told her, 'I know you don't, honey. But I'm going to find out who does,'" Spencer recalled.

With the help of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Woman's City Club and others, black and white people went to Coney Island every day for a week, asking for admittance.

One lawsuit eventually won blacks the right to enter the park. It took a second lawsuit to grant blacks the right to swim there.

"Here were women who were unafraid to challenge the status quo and change it," Spencer said. "Everything I went into, they were there to help."

Taking Pride

The Woman's City Club has enough history and accomplishments to fill a book. Actually, it has enough for two books. A book about the club's first 50 years was published a while ago. A second

volume about the club's second 50 years called "Lighting the Fire, Leading the Way" will be ready in time for the March 6 dinner, Noonan said.

I asked each woman to tell me: Which accomplishment of Woman's City Club has made you most proud?

Christenson said it was her work on the club's Housing Committee in the mid 1980s. The club was following a lawsuit challenging whether public money could be spent on affordable, subsidized housing. The case made it all the way to the Ohio Supreme Court, which ruled that the state constitution didn't allow for such spending.

Cincinnati Womens Club president Susan Noonan, Marian Spencer and Dot Christenson sat down with WCPO to talk about the club's history.

Emily Maxwell | WCPO

Christenson was discussing the decision with Mary Asbury, who is now executive director of the Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati, and she said Asbury responded: "Then we need to change the constitution."

Woman's City Club formed a coalition that worked throughout the state to build support, and voters passed a constitutional amendment in 1989 that took effect in 1990.

"I was very pleased," she said. "It was my committee when it started. I was president when it passed."

Spencer picked a memory from the 1980s, too.

Although the club always has been focused on Greater Cincinnati, Spencer convinced its leaders to take on a national issue.

Ronald Reagan was president at the time. A Planned Parenthood clinic had been bombed, and the president met with a group of pro-life advocates afterward, Spencer recalled.

Spencer convinced the club's membership to take a stand and write a letter to the president denouncing the meeting.

The letter said, in essence: "How you're welcoming the other side to the White House gives them the idea that this is OK," Spencer said.

Noonan said she's most proud of the scholarships that the club has been able to award to female high school seniors. The club awards three scholarships of \$1,000 each year, and the winners can

But, for Noonan, there are plenty of accomplishments still ahead.

"This economic disparity for women is coming to the forefront," she said. "We're going to work toward, for one thing, raising the minimum wage to a livable wage. It will make such a difference to the world."

Just like it has for 100 years, the Woman's City Club will continue to shine a spotlight on problems that might make others uncomfortable and fight for what its members believe will make our community a better place.

In the words of Spencer:

"You've got to have spirit. You've got to be unafraid. Because how else can you venture?"

For more information about Woman's City Club, becoming a member or its upcoming events, go to <http://womanscityclub.org/> (<http://womanscityclub.org/>).

Lucy May writes about the people, places and issues that define our region – to celebrate what makes the Tri-State great and shine a spotlight on issues we need to address. To reach her, email lucy.may@wcpo.com.

For more stories by Lucy, go to www.wcpo.com/may (<http://www.wcpo.com/may>). Follow her on Twitter @LucyMayCincy.

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