For 75 years, Baton Rougeans have found a home away from home at the YMCA. The YMCA was organized 75 years ago in Baton Rouge. Its first home, left, was on North Fourth Street and served the organization for 33 years before a new facility was built on Foster Drive.

This youngsters tries on some high tops in preparation for one day playing on a YMCA basketball team. More than 1,300 youngsters participate in the YMCA's basketball program each year.

Fred Greer, Jr., third row right, became a member of the YMCA as a youngster in 1927 and later went on to work for the organization. Here, Greer poses with a basketball team he coached in the mid-1930s.

‘Y’ still pulling people together

By KAREN MARTIN

Fred Greer Jr. grew up at the YMCA. So did Jo-Paul Steiner and Jim Clinton and Woody Dumas and Dr. Leon Bombel. To these community leaders and thousands of others, the "Y" was a home away from home. For many, it was the only family they had.

"I joined the "Y" in 1927 after my mother died," the 75-year-old Greer recalled. "My father moved us to a boarding house, the Magnolia Inn, catercorner from the old "Y" on Fourth Street. I was at the "Y" almost every day. The "Y" practically raised me."

Former Mayor Dumas, 75, was one of nine children his mother had to rear alone.

"The "Y" gave us a different look at life," Dumas said. "It kept us out of things we were not supposed to be getting into. It kept us off the streets."

Bombel, 87, said one of the highlights of his youth occurred at the "Y." When he was 10 or 11 years old, he won the Duncan Yo-Yo championship that was held at the "Y." Bombel said: "I still keep a

‘Y’ celebration slated Friday

On Friday, the Baton Rouge YMCA will be 75. Each of the three local branches will be holding celebrations in honor of the anniversary.

Cake and punch will be available all day at both the C.B. Pennington Jr. Branch and the Pennington-Clark Branch. A citywide open house will be held at the A.C. Lewis Branch from 4 to 6 p.m. Former board chairman and the current chairman, Jim Clinton, will be honored guests.

For more information about any "Y" programs, call the branch nearest you:

A.C. Lewis Branch, 304 S. Foster Drive, 334-2606
C.B. Pennington Jr. Branch, 12000 Old Hammond Highway, 272-9323
Pennington-Clark Branch, 1700 Thomas Bulget Drive, 346-4773

YMCA lifeguard Jason Mauterer talks with 6-year-old Megan Coney at the indoor pool at the A.C. Lewis Branch on Foster Drive.
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It was a great honor," Brown said. "It was a signal that my contributions were really helping others. And, that's what the Y is all about - people pulling together. The Y is nothing if not people - people you can depend on.

The C.B. Pennington Jr. Branch on Old Hammond Highway was established by C.B. "Doc" Pennington as a memorial to the junior Pennington. It was chartered in 1978. Gifts like those from Pennington have been instrumental in keeping the "Y" growing organization, said Jim Clinton, chairman of the all-volunteer YMCA Board of Directors.

Changes continued for the "Y," one of the most important being the inclusion of women on "Y" membership roles. "Y" director Clarke Mitchell can't put a date on it, but records show memberships for women dating from the early '60s. Women now comprise about half of the YMCA's 4,000 membership, and more than half of its staff.

The organization has become more family oriented over the years, and now is the nation's largest provider of child care services. The YMCA's budget and membership have changed to reflect this.

"Probably more important than the changes that have occurred are the constants," said Mitchell, who has been director of the "Y" since 1981. "That is, each YMCA continues as an organization because we can be a partner in each community to focus on what that community or the part of the community needs."

As an example of the viability of the Baton Rouge "Y," Mitchell pointed to program changes made in the Baranco-Clark Branch in 1987.

It became more of a cultural center," said Mitchell. "We started teaching reading and literacy. There are still some recreational programs, but there are also programs on teen-age pregnancy and pregnancy prevention and drug abuse prevention. There's a large summer day camp, and there are programs for seniors. The Council on Aging serves meals from that building. We have Bible study and some exercise programs for seniors.

The program changes got mixed reviews at first.

"On the one hand everyone wants the same thing that others have," said Mitchell. "On the other hand, the neighborhood had unique needs and we wanted to meet those." Reassessing the community's needs is a continuing process, said Clinton.

"On a regular basis, we pull back and look at the whole picture and get a handle on where we're going and where we should be going," said Clinton, president of Louisiana Partnership for Technology and Innovation. "We recognize a continually evolving role for the organization . A decade ago, if you asked about the 'Y,' someone would point to a gymnasium and a swimming pool. Fundamentally, what's happening in the organization is that people recognize that the 'Y' is not a building. It's the people. It's a larger concept than just buildings.

"The 'Y' is a sport, a recreation program, a social program, and it's a lot more," said Mitchell. "Athletics, however, are still a major drawing card at the YMCA. On just about any weekday lunch hour, you can find a game of pick-up basketball in progress at the A.C. Lewis Branch.

The YMCA's Youth Development Programs' basketball, day camp, baseball, Indian Guides and Princeses, flag football, soccer and after-school programs are some of the most popular in the city.

We have more than 1,300 youth enrolled in the Youth Development Program for basketball," Mitchell said. "That's about 130 teams and each has a volunteer coach. Most have two coaches. During baseball, we have a similar number." Unique about the youth programs is that there are no scoreboards, no trophies, no all-star teams.

"Our philosophy is that every youngster should play in every game," said Mitchell, adding that sometimes it's hard to keep parents' egos in check.

In addition to basketball, adults can enjoy a host of physical activities from aerobic classes to swimming and weightlifting.

But physical conditioning is only one part of the "Y" triangle, which also includes spirit and mind.

"The 'Y' is not only about the sides for the mind and spirit," said Mitchell. "They're all the same size." Change has occurred somewhat in the 'Y's' spiritual mission, Mitchell said.

"The Christian aspect comes through in the atmosphere and climate here. We do not proselytize. There have been changes in this regard. It used to be more evangelical. Now, we do not attempt to convert people. We create an atmosphere and climate that lets people know a certain behavior is appropriate and we enforce that pretty rigidly," said Mitchell.

For example, risque T-shirts are frowned upon, and offenders are asked to change.

"The people understand what we're trying to do here, and they don't have a problem with that," said Mitchell.

The YMCA also tries to meet community needs through special programs.

"Our motto is that we never turn anyone away because they cannot pay," said Mitchell. Obviously, there are limitations on that, but we have a number of fund drives, and we do have a community fund support, and we have a lot of company involvement in that.召回 said Mitchell.

This year, "Y" scholarships totaling more than $150,000 were awarded, Mitchell said.

"The YMCA operates on a $2.5 million budget today, 12 percent of which comes from the United Way. The balance comes from fees and memberships paid by the members.

About half of the budget goes for salaries for the "Y" 40 full-time and 250-300 part-time employees. The number of part-time employees fluctuates during the year - more are needed for summer programs, such as swimming.

Mitchell said the "Y" couldn't operate, however, without its volunteer manpower. He said more than 1,000 people donate their time and efforts to making the YMCA work.

"Some give a few hours. Some give a few months," said Mitchell. "It's the people that make the 'Y' a success, not programs or buildings.

"We are an association of 4,000 people. We have, support, and we serve, and we try to serve, and we try to serve. . . . I mean, you could play basketball in a vacant parking lot. The 'Y' is so much more than that. It's truly as association of people. And that's what it makes us work," Mitchell said.