It’s been two decades since the doors were initially opened at the YWCA’s residential recovery program, and today this program is as vital and as life-changing as ever. As we celebrate this very special milestone, let’s see how we got here and where the future may take us.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE: A HISTORY
From President Nixon’s “War on Drugs” in the early 1970s to Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” campaign in the 1980s to the tragedy of OxyContin kicking off the opioid crisis in 1995, drug and alcohol abuse has permeated our society in frightening numbers. According to the CDC, nearly 71,000 Americans died from various overdoses in 2019, a staggering loss by any standard.

CLOSE TO HOME
The Evansville area is not immune to what is happening elsewhere in our country. To help address the situation in the early 2000s, Vanderburgh County was one of the early implementers of a new concept called “drug court” to reduce substance abuse in non-violent offenders. An alternative to incarceration, the purpose of the courts is to reduce recidivism and help offenders get the treatment and education they need to overcome their addictions. However, the challenge locally was that options for long-term residential programs—a more comprehensive approach than shorter-term options—were non-existent at that time. This particularly affected low-income, homeless individuals who truly had nowhere to turn for help. It was the perfect opportunity for the YWCA to take action. The area’s premier residential recovery program was opened by the YWCA in 2001, targeting some of the most vulnerable women in our community.

Originally named the Transition Housing Recovery Program (or THRP), the program took up half of the third floor of our historic downtown building. It housed women—both from drug court and not—who were in recovery from drug and alcohol addictions, offering a wide range of services to help the clients learn to live sober lives and eventually move into a home of their own. Within a couple of years of its initial opening, the program’s popularity surged. A decision was made then to devote the entire floor-24 bedrooms—to the ever-growing need for residential recovery services in our area.

Now in its 20th year, and with its name recently simplified to YES! (an acronym for YWCA Embracing Sobriety), this program is unmatched in our area and has proven to be standard-setting in the professional recovery community. (For details of the myriad services YES! provides, please visit www.ywcaevansville.org.)

YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW
When current recovery advocate Debra Hicks began her job at the YWCA, the YES! program had just opened. “The only alternative for clients was a short-term facility. No long-term recovery residences existed until ours,” she says. In the years since she began her career at the YW, she’s seen a lot. “Many of the women use substances as a way to lessen the pain of their lives,” she reports, giving as an example a client who was beaten regularly by her husband. Rape, molestation, horrendous childhoods—Hicks and other staff members help clients move past these histories into a more productive life. In some cases, substance abuse is the only life these women know, according to Hicks, and often it bleeds from one generation into the next. Hicks’s formula for success is a combination of structure, sternness, and compassion. She truly believes in the mission of the YES! program. Talking with clients and getting them on the right path is what makes her happiest. “This is my calling,” she says with a smile. “I’m a listener.”
HAPPY 20TH BIRTHDAY, CONT.

Vanderburgh County Superior Court Judge Wayne Trockman is impressed with the YES! program as well. He often sends clients to the program as part of his work with the local drug treatment court. In fact, the vast majority of clients come from these courts in Vanderburgh and Warrick Counties. “Our experience with the YWCA has been nothing but positive,” says Trockman. “I always feel comfortable and secure when a woman is placed there because I know that she’s safe. The YW never says no to a woman in need.” Judge Trockman went on to say that it truly takes a community to help addicts, and the YWCA is an important part of this endeavor.

Dee Lewis, YWCA’s Director of Client Services, is at the helm of the YES! program and has been involved with it for almost as long as the program has existed. “The client population has changed over the years,” she says. “At first, we served mostly middle-aged women. Today, we’re also seeing younger clients.” She also mentions that the program staff are seeing more women with a dual diagnosis, that is, substance abuse along with a mental health issue, the combination of which requires a more delicate balance of treatment. Lewis is proud of what YES! has accomplished over the years (nearly 750 women have been served) and says it’s an honor to work alongside her clients. As far as the future of the program, she sees a more robust emphasis put on family-oriented services. “Keeping families together is key,” she says. “Better families equal better results, building our community to what it can be.”

A NOTE FROM YWCA CEO ERIKA TAYLOR

I am incredibly proud to be part of the 20th anniversary of the YES! program! Every day we see amazing examples of resilient women who overcome tremendous obstacles and empower themselves to create new lives. The snowball effect of the last 20 years of this program to our community is astounding. I am honored to celebrate this landmark accomplishment, and I look forward to many more years of helping women reach new heights. And as many accolades as I can give this program, its success over the years is best measured in the words of our own clients. I share comments of two of them here:

“Happy 20th birthday, YES! program. When I entered this program a few years ago, I was at my rock bottom, having lost everything—job, house, kid—and on the brink of overdosing. Then the Warrick County drug court placed me at the YWCA. I myself was hesitant but ready for a fresh start. Believe me when I say this program saved my life. It taught me that even addicts can overcome adversities. Through YES! I learned to become the best form of myself, and I am eternally grateful! #WeDoRecover”

- Melissa Burch, former YES! client*

“The YES! program changes lives. It changed mine.”

- Tatiana O’Malley, current YES! client*

*Actual client names used with permission
Due to COVID restrictions, we were not able to photograph as many of our generous holiday donors as normal. Please know of our sincere appreciation for your generosity to our organizations and those we serve.

**Pictured top to bottom:** Over the years, our friends at Gerling Law have made a tradition of creating themed bags for our adult housing clients. This year’s bag was stuffed with self-care items including a luxury blanket, adult coloring book, markers, embroidery kit, face mask, hand sanitizer, and a hot cocoa kit. Thank you, Gerling Law, for pampering our residents each holiday season! ■ Local entrepreneur, Emery Borders, recently visited YWCA Evansville to deliver donations for our YES! program residents. Using proceeds from her homemade dog treat business, Emery’s Workshop, this young lady stocked our shelves with kitchen necessities and other basic hygiene items. We love watching young donors like Emery become passionate about our mission, and are extremely grateful for her generosity. ■ Each year, the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 73 delivers holiday toys and gifts for our youngest clients to enjoy, and this year was no exception. We once again received a large donation including fun items for our hard to buy for teens. ■ Our friends at Frontier-Kemper Constructors helped bring joy to many of our resident children this past holiday. Their team coordinated a toy drive and made a huge delivery to the YWCA in December. Pictured with the donation are Sheryl Hale and Erika Taylor.
Join YWCA Evansville from the comfort of your own home to raise funds to provide after-school programming and mentors for girls in addition to safe shelter and services to survivors of domestic violence and homeless women in recovery.

This year’s Tribute to Achievement is all about the girls!

You will hear inspiring stories from past and present participants of the Live Y’ers program. We will honor their courage, determination and achievements in addition to announcing this year’s Berkley Ann Branson Young Women of Promise Scholarship recipients.

Don’t miss this opportunity to be one of the first to hear an exciting announcement from Don Mattingly!

TUESDAY, MAY 25TH | NOON

Event is FREE but registration is required, visit https://tributetoachievement.swell.gives

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