

Lifelong Advocates for Women

Remembering Betty Jane Altier and Ermine B. Byas



Betty Jane Altier first came to the YWCA in the 1950s when she attended art and literature classes. She first joined the YWCA's Board of Directors in 1967. She had just been elected President of the Board in 1970 when the YWCA announced its One Imperative – “the elimination of racism wherever it exists, and by whatever means necessary.”

Despite the emotionally-charged dialogues sparked by the announcement, under Betty's courageous leadership, the agency demonstrated an unwavering dedication to the pursuit of racial justice and the dignity of all. To this day, that commitment lives on here at the YWCA.

In 1971, Betty was one of the first women to be elected President of the YWCA's Board of Trustees, the governing body responsible for the fiscal management of the agency. In 1995, she served as a member of the Advisory Committee for the Breaking New Ground for Women Campaign. She also served as a member of the YWCA's Community Advisory Council. More recently, she was co-chair of the 2008-2009 Annual Appeal with Ermine Byas. She and Ermine accepted the Empowering Women Award at last year's luncheon on behalf of all Board Members past and present.

In addition to her service for the YWCA, Betty was recognized by the Rochester Chamber of Commerce for her civic leadership and her commitment to education and to cultural and human service institutions here in the community. Over the years she contributed her wisdom, energy and leadership skills to the Red Cross, RPO, and Urbanarium – to name a few. An advocate for urban growth, she also served as a member of the Women's Coalition for Downtown, the Monroe County Planning Board, the Monroe County Visitors Bureau and the Cultural District Committee.



Ermine B. Byas first volunteered at the YWCA of Rochester and Monroe County in 1960, having participated in YWCA activities as a youngster in St. Louis.

Ermine became President of our Board of Directors in 1966, the first African-American elected to that position. She has said that “the YWCA was the only place where black professional women could learn leadership skills they needed in order to move forward in the community.” Ermine led the YWCA with courage and compassion, inspiring women all across our community to join together to promote racial justice.

She was a member of the National Board of the YWCA USA from 1970-1982. She served as Chairperson of the Eastern Region from 1973-1976. In addition to her years of service for the YWCA, Ermine also served on the Board of the Genesee Valley Girl Scouts, the Rochester Area Council of Churches, Young Audiences, and Keuka College. She was on the Board of the United Way of Greater Rochester. She also served as President and Treasurer of both the Delta Nu Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. and the Rochester Chapter of the Links, Inc.

Ermine retired as Director of Nutritional Services from Highland Hospital in 1988. She served as a member of both the Genesee and American Dietetic Associations. Most recently, she was a member of the Finance Committee of Christ Church and Treasurer of the Board of the Women's Interfaith Coalition.

Here at the YWCA, we will miss their friendship, their guidance, and their passion for our mission, but know that the impact of these two wonderful women will continue in the years to come.