

## **The Y – an intricately woven fabric of humanity**

Raising a family in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not an easy thing. Certainly, it never has been, as each generation has encountered its own unique challenges. But living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century does have some rather formidable challenges. Things really began to change dramatically by the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when time and labor-saving devices were made widely available, allowing for what supposedly would be more leisure time for all. It didn't quite work out as such, for that much anticipated expectation of expanded leisure time, seems to have evaded us, at least for a considerable number of American families.

The fact is, more families now than ever have parents/caregivers working jobs outside the home; be it full-time, part-time and/or a combination of both. Quite often work continues after “work hours” in the form of continued connectivity with work through a variety of electronic devices. Additionally, many families do not have the benefit of extended family living close by; grandparents, aunts/uncles, etc.... The result of these two major factors, combine to create the perfect deficit in time and resources.

So, what is a family to do facing these 21<sup>st</sup> century realities?

I asked that question of Michelle Anamisis, our YMCA Youth Development Director to get some up close perspective on the matter. She oversees over 120 kids in our Preschool and 225 kids in our Y's Kids Child Care Program. In other words, she talks to a lot of parents and hears their concerns and questions nearly every day of the year. One of the first things she recommended was that parents need to establish a support network. Parents today are juggling quite a lot between work, home life, kids activities, caring for their own aging parents, and the list goes on. Developing a network of family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues, is critical to finding ways to meet all the demands of daily life. When something comes up at work last minute, it sure is a relief to have a friend or neighbor to call upon to pick the kids up at school. The second piece of advice from this experienced child and family professional, is take the time to investigate and then participate in family activities offered in the community. Reading the local newspapers is a great way to learn what's happening. She added, “You know, a lot of parents really don't know where to start in looking for family opportunities.”

Well, fortunately there is a place, that given the opportunity, will meet time and again both those needs; providing a support network and offering families activities. It's kind of the Walmart, you know the “One-stop shopping concept”, of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, although we've been around a whole lot longer; more than 160 years actually. That place is the YMCA.

Here in Westfield, at the YMCA of Greater Westfield, we have a long history of being both a comforting support for individuals and families, as well as a builder of people. For

nearly 125 years, generations of families have drawn much spiritual, physical and mental sustenance from the Y and given it right back into this robust, enduring community. There are many, many stories to support this reality. Here's just one.

Nearly 60 year ago a young husband and wife living in Westfield decided that their three children should know how to swim. Well, there was one pool in Westfield, and it was the YMCA pool. So Francis and Shirley Merlo arranged to have their three children; Sandy, Sharon and Gary take weekly swim lessons. These continued as the children grew older and attended the Westfield Intermediate School, (the Jr. High). While at the Intermediate School, the three walked with their classmates to the Y once a week for swim lessons. Incidentally, the PE teacher would drive her car to the Y, while the school children walked on their own. Later in high school, Sandy joined the TRI-HI Y Club – a YMCA girls' service club that did service projects in the community and around the Y. The Club was so big it had three separate clubs comprised of three grade levels. And there was a HI-Y corresponding boys club as well, with some 50 high school boys. Sandy continued her association with the Y during her college years, taking exercise classes whenever she could. Years later, married with two children, Sandy (Merlo) Petrucelli brought her daughters, Carrie and Susan, to the Y for a variety of programs including swim lessons and Stay-at-Y Preschool Summer Camp. Today, her daughters, Susan Petrucelli and Carrie Tavares, now mothers themselves, bring their kids, Noah and Mia, to the Y for Preschool, T-Ball and basketball. Therein, they have continued to develop an extensive, interdependent network of friends. Sandy is still a member of the Y today, attending the Active Older Adults program and swimming with her grandkids in the Y pool. The Y clearly has played a central part in this family's long history and I suspect will continue to do so in future generations. As Sandy said, "We have so many good memories associated with the Y; it really has been so important to our lives."

And so it goes; family after family, finding the Y, and falling into an expansive community of support and goodwill. They, along with thousands of others, have discovered that the Y is far more than a building, but is a huge intricately woven fabric of humanity, expressing in the very best way, our intrinsic commonalities.

So how can your family get involved?

From swim and gymnastic lessons to music and arts classes, we have a diverse offering of programs available for the whole family. Newly created this past January are Saturday Family Nights. Each Saturday night from 6:30-8:30 features a different activity theme from obstacle courses in the gym to board game nights to family fitness. These are free to Y members. For non-members the cost is only \$5.00 per adult and \$3.00 per child. On the fourth Friday of each month, we have Family Fun Swim Nights starting at 7:00PM; free to members, with the same price structure as above for non-members. Every second Friday evening of the month is Kids Night Out! This program gives parents an

opportunity to go out while the kids get to participate in a wide array of activities from 5:30-9:30PM for just \$15 per child.

And coming this summer, we'll be opening the Camp Shepard Family Center. Every weekend during the summer months, families can gather for a variety of activities each weekend including enjoying the beautifully renovated outdoor pool. This too is free for family members and will be open to non-members for an affordable season pass.

There's lots going on at your local YMCA right in downtown Westfield. We encourage you to come in for a tour, take a fitness class (one free class to try us out), and come enjoy our family programs. Not sure about affordability? Financial assistance is available. Give us a try; you might just be delightfully surprised! We are located at 67 Court Street. Our phone number is 413-568-8631 and our website is [www.westfieldymca.org](http://www.westfieldymca.org).

Rosann Scalise

January 28, 2012