

Apex History

Association of Civilian Widows

The story of the *Association of Civilian Widows* began in Western Australia where Apex Clubs began a project to assist civilian widows to fight for the ordinary things in life which so many of them lacked at that time; sufficient food, clothing, housing and education for their children. In 1957 and with a success in WA under their belt, Apex brought the "*Aid to Civilian Widows Project*" to New South Wales. It was to be a two year project, from 1957 to 1959.

A series of advertisements were placed in newspapers, seeking civilian widows who were interested in forming an association, which would campaign to secure better treatment for widows and their children. Director of the scheme was Apexian, **Len Bosman**, and the first meeting was held in his place of business, Lyndel Lodge in Hurstville. Branches were formed all over the state, starting in Wollongong, Hurstville, Rockdale and many other places.

Before the branches could be formed into a state organisation, a small problem revealed itself. There already existed a registered organisation calling itself The Civilian Widows Association, formed in 1949 by the United Association of Women. When approached, the women of the CWA agreed to join the Apex project and became the Sydney Branch of the Association of Civilian Widows (NSW).

The inaugural State Conference was held on the 23rd August 1958 at the CENEF Auditorium in Castlereagh Street, Sydney. It was a small hall, not large enough for the numbers attending: 392 women and 93 Apexians. The meeting was chaired by Len Bosman with his committee Apexian Carl Baumgarten, Jim McBurney, Hal Westall, Don Stanmore. Others present were Brian Quigley, Charles Sayers, John Bryant and Norman Clapham.

Delegates came from 53 Branches, some of them accompanied by their Apexians. Quite a few branches were not able to send anyone.

The meeting elected the following office bearers, President Mrs Hennington – Wollongong, Secretary Nance Monk – Hurstville, Treasurer Flo Wait; Committee: Mrs Breakspeare – Rockdale, Mrs Ebert – Randwick, Mrs McKibben – Drummoyne, Mrs Sparks – Bankstown.

The following March, Mrs Hennington resigned and Eva Franks was elected in her place, a position she held for 11 years.

Two things stand out from the photographs from those early years, the youthful faces of the Apexians, and every one of the women are wearing a hat.

The next step was to find an office. A central location was needed so that members coming in from the country for help or advice would have no difficulty finding it. At this stage there was no money. The Family Welfare Bureau had been given a wooden building that had been built on the corner of Castlereagh and Martin Place where Westpac Bank now stands. The Bureau kindly offered ACW the use of half their kitchen table as their office and so 28 Martin Place became the Widows' address. Space at the table was limited and while the Widows secretary was attending to her duties at one end of the table, tea and scones were being served at the other.

At the first State meeting, it was decided that Branches would pay a levy to Headquarters so that the office and its services could be expanded. As money came in, another of the rooms in the building was obtained. Fruit boxes placed on their sides on top one another, with a curtain hanging over their open fronts served as a cupboard. Someone donated a typewriter and the Widows were in business. From Martin Place, the Widows moved to a room in a building on the corner of Elizabeth and Park Streets. Here they remained for some time before acquiring their own headquarters at Petersham. This was a two storey building which accommodated a hostel on the top floor with rooms for visiting Widows. Office space and meeting rooms were on the ground floor. Money to buy the building came entirely from the members, a tribute to the hard work of many women.

Support from Apex went well beyond the two years of the initial project. When the Widows moved to their Petersham Headquarters in 1965, the young men of Apex gave up many days of their spare time in a program of repair, renovation and maintenance.

ACW continued to work for its members for many years. Unfortunately dwindling numbers have resulted in the decision being taken to fold the NSW/ACT Division.

Apex, in the form of the Apex Foundation, has again come to the assistance of the Association of Civilian Widows in NSW & ACT. While it is very sad to see the NSW/ACT Division fold, the establishment of a trust with the Apex Foundation will ensure the legacy of ACW lives on forever. With the proceeds of the sale of the Petersham property, excellent management of the financial resources of the ACW, a significant contribution has been handed over to the Apex Foundation to manage as trustee.

Past members of ACW will be part of an advisory committee to the Apex Foundation Board. The committee will assess grant applications under guidelines set down by ACW and the Apex Foundation and make recommendations for funding. (These guidelines can be found on this web site)