Ethlyn Christensen, Recipient
1985 University of Wyoming Distinguished Alumni Award

She has also been chairwoman of the Colorado Social Security Committee and has participated in the state legislature's housing committee. Christensen's work doesn't limit her concerns to the elderly. "Because we live in the community and care about the quality of community life, we have a responsibility for being actively involved as citizens in the wide range of problems which are the concerns of all ages," she said.

She has also been active in issues involving child day care, domestic employees' rights and women's rights.

For Christensen, formal education didn't end at YW in 1928 with her master's degree as she took advanced studies at Columbia University and spent the first eight months of her retirement traveling through Scandinavian countries to observe their social and economic institutions and, in particular, their services for the elderly.

While in Scandinavia, Ethlyn went to the hometown of her Danish parents to learn more about her family history. Lutheran priests in Denmark keep accurate records of everyone born in the country, Christensen said, and she wanted information about her mother's ancestry (she was already familiar with her father's family history). Priests indeed had the information she was looking for and Ethlyn ended up staying with her mother's relatives while she was studying the social services for the elderly in Scandinavia.

For her efforts with the elderly in Denver, Christensen was also honored by Denver's KBTV Channel 9 in 1978 as one of 10 people selected by the television station for the 9 Who Care Award. The award is given in recognition of Colorado's outstanding volunteers.

Lamm summed up his recommendation for Ethlyn to be honored by the National Council of Women by saying "Ms. Christensen is cited over and over as a role model by those with whom she has worked, not as a role model for how to age gracefully or retire successfully, but how to live fully at any age.

"Her intelligence, her tenaciousness, her unusual ability to crystallize issues and goals to motivate others would make her a phenomenal success in any field. We in Colorado are grateful that she has chosen to direct them toward the interests of all of us as we grow older. She has enriched the lives of all of us who know her and millions of people who have never had that opportunity."
Learning to Make a Difference

By Rick Carpenter
ALUMNEWS Editor

Although politically and socially active for most of her life, it wasn't until 15 years after her retirement that Ethlyn Christensen received national recognition for her role in securing equal rights and services for senior citizens.

As the 1982 recipient of the prestigious Women of Conscience Award presented by the National Council of Women of the United States, Christensen was honored for helping to establish a number of programs and services to meet the needs of senior citizens in Denver and throughout Colorado.

But it was during her college years, almost 60 years prior to receiving the Women of Conscience Award, that the groundwork for recognizing and understanding the needs of people throughout the world was first uncovered for Christensen.

Fifty-seven years after leaving the University of Wyoming with both a bachelor's and a master's degree in hand, Christensen will return to campus to be honored as a Distinguished Alumna during homecoming celebrations October 10-12.

While serving as president of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) at the University of Wyoming during the mid-1920s, a decision was made to combine the YWCA with the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to form the Student Christian Association (SCA).

Since the two organizations were combining, only one president was to be elected from the two previous groups. Little did they know the decision to combine the groups and an incident following their combination would have a direct affect on literally millions of people through a changed Ethlyn Christensen.

"A woman on the advisory committee for the SCA came to me and said, 'I think it would be best to just have Herb's (Herb Woodman, previously the president of the YMCA) name on the ballot for SCA president because we've never had a woman president of a co-ed organization."

Ethlyn insisted on having her name included on the ballot and, after a tough campaign, she became the first woman president of a co-ed organization at the University. From the moment the woman asked Christensen not to have her name on the ballot, Ethlyn has worked for equal rights, not only for women, but for minorities and senior citizens as well.

It was during those early years of her life that Ethlyn began to become aware of what her role in life was to be.

"Her intelligence, her tenaciousness, her unusual ability to crystallize issues and goals to motivate others would make her a phenomenal success in any field," Colorado Governor Richard D. Lamm said of Christensen.

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As primarily a type of chamber of commerce gimmick to lure people to the territory, Wyoming was the first known territory in the world to give women the right to vote and hold office in 1869. Then, when Wyoming became the 44th state in the Union in 1890, part of their constitution included the provision to allow women to vote and hold office, thus becoming the first state in the U.S. to give women their voting rights.

But, it was in the 1920s before 36 of the 48 states ratified the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution to allow women to vote and hold office in the country.

As a sociologist and psychologist major in the early '20s, Christensen studied and read about social problems existing throughout the world and at her back door in the U.S. and Wyoming.

Because the country had women's voting rights on their minds, Christensen became fully aware of the important role the State of Wyoming had played in the women's movement but she was still aware of problems existing within the state and at the University.

She recalls a friend who qualified for a loan of some type, but was not granted the loan because she was told she would have to sign her husband's name. Since the friend wasn't married, Ethlyn said "I worked on getting people like her recognized so they could get money in their own name."

Another situation on campus came up when an American Association of University Women (AAUW) speaker was going to speak at UW and she was told she would have to use her husband's name, that she couldn't speak in her own name. "I said, well then, she won't speak and she didn't," Christensen said.

Her political activity didn't end with the women's movement. When she went to the University president to ask if a speaker she had heard in an Estates Park seminar could speak on campus, the president said "no."

So Ethlyn quickly organized a group of people interested in hearing the speaker and rented a downtown building, set up chairs and then took up donations during the speaker's presentation to pay for the expenses. Because the speaker was well known at the time, university students and faculty members packed the building. Christensen doesn't remember now who the speaker was, but she said he must have presented something in the political science realm since that was the focus of the Estates Park seminar she attended.

Christensen, who later in life would attend the famous "I have a dream" speech given by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. about six years prior to his tragic death, also saw discrimination around her and fought to gain civil rights for minorities.

She recalled an incident on campus when a choir was told to put a black member on the back row before it performed. Ethlyn quickly Jumped in and said the choir wouldn't perform under those circumstances. Again, she got her way.

Those early incidents and working close with some women faculty members inspired Christensen to pursue a career of social service mainly through the YWCA.

"If I hadn't had my Christensen at the University of Wyoming with these kinds of things," she said, "I never would have gotten involved in a lot of things I did."

After graduating with a master's degree in political economy from UW in 1928, Christensen spent most of the next 40 years working for the YWCA before retiring in 1968.

During the time she worked for the YWCA, Ethlyn focused on developing and implementing interracial activities for women working in factories in Oklahoma City, Indianapolis, Turtle Creek, Pa. and Buffalo, N.Y. before becoming director of research and program resources and executive director of the public affairs committee of the national board of the YWCA in 1954.

Christensen's continued involvement in the women's movement took her to the White House in 1963 to be one of four women invited into the Oval Office to witness President John F. Kennedy sign into law a bill aimed at assuring women of equal paychecks to those of men doing the same work. She still has a copy of the picture of her with President Kennedy just five months before his assassination.

When Christensen retired and moved to Denver, she became more aware of problems facing senior citizens. Retirement for Ethlyn now meant devoting 60 to 70 hours a week into improving the quality of life for the elderly, primarily in the interracial Capitol Hill section of Denver which has the highest concentration of senior citizens in Colorado.

Colorado Governor Richard D. Lamm, who nominated Christensen for the 1982 Woman of Conscience Award, said she had devoted thousands of hours of her own time to helping senior citizens, primarily by improving transportation and health services and by increasing political awareness of the needs of senior citizens.

"She writes grants, raises funds, collects petition signatures, lobbies, conducts door-to-door surveys, testifies at hearings, writes position papers and gives radio and television interviews," Lamm said in his recommendation for the award.

Christensen became concerned about the lack of health services for the aging in her neighborhood and promptly helped establish the Capitol Hill Health Support Council and the Health Clinic which is devoted to helping senior citizens develop good health habits and assist them in maintaining as independent a lifestyle as possible. The Health Support Council sponsors health forums, health screenings and educational programs to explain the process of aging and the benefits of staying healthy and active. The council also supports the prevention of unnecessary nursing home placement for the elderly.

Her efforts didn't end there. When Christensen became aware of transportation problems for the