

## Ethlyn Christensen, Recipient

*1985 University of Wyoming Distinguished Alumni Award*



Ethlyn Christensen didn't stop working when she retired. Instead, she went to work for senior citizens and won the 1982 Woman of Conscience Award from the National Council on Women. At home, she reads to

keep up to date on issues facing senior citizens and other special interests groups.

elderly and handicapped, she chaired Denver's Regional Transportation District's Advisory Committee on Transportation for the Elderly and Handicapped through which she was able to have 5-cent bus service provided for seniors with the front seats of the buses reserved for the elderly and disabled. She is also credited with helping establish bus service from 50 senior citizen high-rise apartment buildings to shopping centers in the Denver area.

Ethlyn has also led a movement to force bus drivers to not move their buses until all elderly and handicapped people have secured seats. The movement began after an incident occurred while Christensen was riding a bus in 1976.

When a "not-so-spry" older woman climbed onto a bus one day in Denver and couldn't find a seat, Ethlyn, in a slightly raised voice, said

"I'm sure one of those nice young people would get up and give you a seat."

When no one budged, the bus driver said "I'm not moving this bus until all older people are seated." A younger rider quickly allowed the elderly woman a seat and the bus continued.

Ethlyn, who is a warm, charming person with uncanny intelligence, is not afraid to speak her piece when the situation arises. She will also go to any length to get her way.

As an example, Gov. Lamm tells the story of Christensen collecting signatures to repeal a Colorado state food tax when she encountered a group of Ukrainians picnicking in a park near her neighborhood. When she discovered the older members of the group couldn't speak English, she sought out a younger member of the group who could speak English to

translate her explanation of the merits of the petition to those older members of the group. They enthusiastically signed the petition, Lamm said.

In a similar situation, Ethlyn once approached a group of deaf and mute people in the park. To overcome the communication problem she recruited a volunteer to translate her message into sign language for the group and, once more, obtained the signatures that helped make her campaign against the food tax a success. Lamm gives full credit to Christensen for getting the tax repealed.

As a charter member and later a chairwoman ("please don't call me a 'chair,' I'm not an inanimate object") of the Denver Commission on Aging, Christensen was appointed by Lamm to be a Colorado delegate to the 1981 White House Conference on Aging.

She has also been chairwoman of the Colorado Social Security Committee and has participated in the state legislature's housing committee.

Christensen 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 UW 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 Sandinavia, 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 KBT 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 who have never had that opportunity."





# Learning to Make a Difference

By Rick Carpenter  
ALUMNEWS Editor

**A**lthough 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

organization," Christensen said.

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

become.

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 sociology and psychology 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

organizational 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 in 1968, she became more aware of problems facing senior citizens. Retirement for Ethlyn now means 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

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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

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 Alumni 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.

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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

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