

# YMCA celebrating 40 years of service to the community

By Rainer Olbrich, Community Contributor

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What business entity do you know that is open for almost 100 hours each week, seven days a week, and year-round? It is none other than our local “Y” — now officially known as the YMCA of the Palms. It has served the community since its incorporation in 1969. Whether you are an early bird or a night owl, the Y’s two facilities are located at 5450 YMCA Road in Naples or at 27200 Kent Road in Bonita Springs.

Originally founded as the Young Men’s Christian Association, the YMCA was founded in 1844 by George Williams in England to provide bible study and prayer meetings to indigents who lived on the streets of London. The YMCA is more than day camp, child care, sports, fitness, or youth programs. While continuing its mission, the organization has grown into a worldwide family of more than 120 autonomous national movements, each committed to building a positive future for youth and families. In the United States alone, more than 2,600 YMCAs serve more than 72 million families. Each Y is an independent entity with local governance, yet adhering to founding principles of the organization by putting Judeo Christian principles into practice through programs that build a healthy spirit, mind and body for all.

The main purpose of our local Y with a current membership of more than 9,000 is to build strong kids, strong families and a strong community. Its core values are: caring, honesty, respect and responsibility. Another reason why our YMCA is so special is that it is open to all people, regardless of age, sex, creed, ability or economic status. Really, the word “YMCA” is synonymous with volunteerism. Volunteers are truly the lifeblood of our Y.

The Y’s success is made possible only through the dedicated efforts of countless volunteers, including some 250 volunteer coaches or referees of its various sports programs. And Y volunteers include fathers, mothers, students, professionals, or retirees — just about anyone. Just come out any Saturday morning and experience the excitement on the grounds of either of the two YMCA facilities.

There are Y programs for all ages, young and old. The YMCA is not just a fitness center. There are many programs for kids of all ages, special fitness classes for seniors and other adults, “avant garde” programs for the serious minded fitness persons, and a renowned swimming program, just to name a few. In addition to its regular programs, the YMCA reaches out to the community in many ways and through special events. These include YMCA Project Graduation, an alcohol- and drug-free social event for graduating high school seniors since 1985; YMCA Splash Week, a week of free water safety lessons for kids in the community; or the periodic Parents’ Night Out or Family Movie Nights.

Our local YMCA functions with an annual budget of more than \$5.5 million and is governed by a Board of Trustees, all dedicated and well known community leaders. They establish the organization’s overall policy and provide its direction. Assisting the Trustees’ efforts are an Endowment Fund Board, a Branch Board of Managers, a large corps of volunteer leaders, and of course the many individual volunteers. Brandon Dowdy, a YMCA professional since 1992, serves as the organization’s president and CEO and supervises a highly trained and professional staff of nearly 200 in the Naples and Bonita Springs facilities.

2009 marks the 40th anniversary of this wonderful community organization. Our Y continues to reach out daily and serve the community in countless ways, as it has for the past 40 years. Future YMCA happenings articles are planned to tell more about this vibrant community service organization.

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Rainer Olbrich is a volunteer and longtime member of the Greater Naples YMCA. Incorporated in 1969, it is now the YMCA of the Palms with facilities in Naples and Bonita Springs and a charitable nonprofit organization. To become a YMCA member, get involved as a volunteer, or make a contribution, call 597-3148 or visit [www.ymcapalms.org](http://www.ymcapalms.org).

