

J. Robert Knight: APD's Good Fortune

APD's first full-time executive director has been on the fast track from the get go—and hasn't slowed down since.

Bruno Ottavi

This is the first article in a series on APD's former executive directors.

—Editor

A popular definition of a wise person is: “One who recognizes the best place to learn is at the feet of an older person.” As an active and dynamic 95-year-old, our celebrity may be considered an older person even though he neither looks nor acts like one. In fact, many current and retired YMCA professionals still enjoy the good fortune to learn at the feet of J. Robert Knight. He is affectionately called “Bob” by just about everyone who greets him—with the possible exception of the judge in traffic court, which hasn’t happened, yet.

One might think that becoming the first full-time paid executive director of your professional society would be considered the high point in a distinguished work career. In the case of Bob Knight, it was merely the culmination of 44 years of illustrious service to the YMCA movement.

Upon retiring from his distinguished YMCA career in 1972, Knight continued to devote his talents and experience to YMCA people through his work with the International Association of Retired Directors, known today as the North American Fellowship of YMCA Retirees (NAFYR). He became president of that

organization in 1978.

Knight’s recognitions have been numerous. Knight was inducted into the YMCA Hall of Fame at Springfield College in 1996. He has been honored with the prestigious William F. Stahl Award, given to one who has made a significant contribution to the advancement of professional knowledge. APD Chapter 32 has recognized him as their Retiree of the Year and, this year, the chapter honored Knight by naming the chapter after him, becoming the “J. Robert Knight Chapter”—the first in the nation to be named after an individual.

Knight modestly attributes much of his achievement to good fortune. But we all know that luck comes most often to those who work hard. He claims his first stroke of luck—beyond being a minister’s son and graduating from Otterbein College—was going immediately to the YMCA of Dayton, Ohio upon graduation. He was selected as one of only six graduates for the two-year Dayton Fellowship Training program. At the end of the first year, Knight was accepted and served for five years, from 1928 to 1934, as assistant young men’s secretary, responsi-

ble for young men’s club programs, developing informal education classes and social activities.

People close to Knight will attest that his greatest stroke of luck came when he met Gertrude Reid at the front desk of the Dayton Y. He soon demonstrated his good judgment by asking for her hand in marriage. They still hold hands and together lead very active lives after 71 years of marriage.

After demonstrating his skills and creativity in developing innovative programs for young adults during the difficult times of the Great Depression, Knight was called to the YMCA at Columbus, Ohio to head up his own adult program department from 1934 to 1941.

Building His Skills

Locating in Columbus gave Knight the advantage of proximity to Ohio State University, where he found time to earn his masters degree. It also made resources available to him as he administered the first comprehensive school of informal adult education in central Ohio.

Success in Columbus provided widespread exposure and resulted in an offer to go to the YMCA of Greater Toledo as the adult program secretary during World War II. His offering of comprehensive programs for members included numerous special recreational programs for Armed Services personnel stationed there. This stint in Toledo saw Knight’s transition from program to administration when he became the first executive of the newly established Central Branch.

At this point in his career, Knight had clearly demonstrated both program skill and administrative acumen. The Ohio-West Virginia Area Council invited him to join their staff with the assignment to deliver services in the areas of adult program and membership. It didn’t take long before his wide



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J. Robert Knight

breadth of talent resulted in his assignment to field responsibilities in all areas of YMCA administration. YMCA executives in the Ohio-West Virginia area are quick to testify that Bob Knight's many years on the area staff had a profound impact on local associations in the fields of general administration, surveys and studies, personnel, long-range planning, staff training and many other areas.

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His leadership in the YMCA professional society, known at the time as the North American Association of YMCA Secretaries, began as secretary in 1954. That was followed by service in many other leadership capacities until he became the association's president in 1963. In that same year, the society was renamed the Association of Professional Directors of the United States (APD).

When APD was ready for a full-time executive director in 1966, Knight was the obvious choice to assume the leadership during the socially turbulent late '60s and at a time when the organization was

restructuring its legislative decision-making procedures and internal processes.

Bob and Gertrude continue to carry on a very active life in Columbus as they contribute their talents to their church, the retirement village where they live, Otterbein College and the Y retirees groups. They are extremely proud of their two sons, one who is a retired YMCA director and the other who is a physician. 