The Extension and Community Association, a Century of Service to North Carolina Families

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Two-thousand thirteen is a historic year for North Carolinians. It is the centennial of the North Carolina Extension and Community Association. As the volunteer arm of Family and Consumer Sciences of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, the Extension and Community Association has inconspicuously helped North Carolina families emerge from a struggling rural economy to a prosperous diverse economy that encompasses both rural and urban lifestyles. Originally organized as Home Demonstration Clubs and individually addressed as Home Demonstration Homemakers, current members are now part of the Extension and Community Association (ECA). Through the educational guidance and researched-based information provided by Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences Agents from NCSU and NC A and T Universities, ECA is a grassroots institution that has actively addressed the needs of families in their perspective communities for the last one hundred years. Though ECA has taken little credit for the industrious and flourishing wellbeing of local communities across the state, in this centenary year of their founding it is time to pay homage to these dynamic, yet humble, women and Extension partners who have continuously aspired to promote the thriving welfare and prosperity of North Carolina families.

Formally organized in 1913 in fourteen counties, the first home demonstration clubs sought to improve the quality of life for their families and that of their neighboring families by dispensing research based information and techniques taught by Extension Home Demonstration Agents through practice, example, and community club work. Early concerns addressed efficiently growing and safely preserving family food supplies, producing additional income for farm families, and increasing social opportunities in isolated rural communities. As the country became embroiled in WWI, home demonstration clubs expanded into 60 North Carolina counties and mobilized to support the war effort. Much of the 8,978,262 jars of food canned by home demonstration homemakers were sent to military bases to feed our troops. With the great influenza epidemic of 1918 home demonstration clubs coordinated their members into nursing squads to feed and care for the sick. Additionally, homemakers established 75 kitchens throughout the state which served an average of 105 people daily during the height of the epidemic.

During the decade of the twenties, home demonstration clubs grew in strength, number and influence. Home Demonstration Clubs were highly structured and recognized in local communities. Club members gained leadership skills and became family advocates in their communities. As a group, community clubs formed the county-wide Federation of Home Demonstration Clubs in which governing bodies of annually elective officers carried out an annual plan of work. Community officers formed the County Council and served as the supporting body to the home agent. By 1924 the state-wide North Carolina Federation of Home Demonstration Clubs created a loan fund to help rural girls get a college education in home economics. Locally, homemakers were interested in supplementing farm family income. With instruction from Home Demonstration Agents, home demonstration homemakers, organized and opened weekly-county curb markets, the forerunners of today’s local farmers’ markets. The public’s interest in obtaining fresh farm raised produce, eggs and meats caused the curb markets to grow in popularity and gain the support of local
governments. Homemakers learned how to increase the yield of produce grown for market and savvy marketing techniques that generated higher family incomes and profits.

By the Great Depression, the number of County Curb Markets steadily increased and during the worst years of the depression. The sales generated at the curb markets proved to be a lifeline for many Homemakers and their families and helped them weather the greatest fiscal storm of the twentieth century. Homemakers also assisted other community families suffering financially from the Depression. Home Demonstration Clubs established “Community Chests” and collected food, clothing and fuel that were handed out to needy and sick families. Diseases from malnutrition became other issues home demonstration homemakers tackled. Taught by Home Demonstration Agents, homemakers learned to stave off diseases like rickets, scurvy, and pellagra. They collectively improved students’ nutritional health by preparing daily hot lunches served with milk in 51 counties and 554 rural schools. Along with promoting youth health, demonstration homemakers wanted to grant leadership opportunities for youth actively involved in 4-H. Clubs jointly began a mission even in the depths of the depression which continues today to help raise money and fund trips to camp, 4-H district, state, and national event s, and grant collegiate scholarships to worthy 4-H youth. Low literacy rates were another concern for Home Demonstration Clubs in a decade fraught with hardships. Clubs across the state established community libraries, book mobiles and helped supply school libraries with books.

Emerging from the depression, families were faced with the subsequent national calamity, World War II. Home Demonstration Clubs placed an emphasis on food production and conservation during the war years to aid with wartime needs. Across the state, Home Demonstration Clubs actively supported war efforts by collecting scrap metal, rendering fat for weapon and ammunition production and growing victory gardens for food production. By 1944 homemakers had preserved over 27,000,000 jars of canned food for the war effort to feed both American soldiers and American allies. Home demonstration clubs helped to raise $4,000,000 by selling war bonds which went to launch to the hospital ship, the Larkspur in 1944. Techniques in food preservation changed during the forties. Due to rationing during the war of staple ingredients used in canning, homemakers learned dehydration methods, and later when electricity was finally available in most rural communities, freezing food became a popular preservation method. In addition to supporting America’s military homemakers supported school children, campaigned for a national school lunch program, and once they succeeded, provided school cafeterias with cooking equipment.

The fifties were a decade of highly visible activities and community involvement for the Home Demonstration Clubs. In fact the Raleigh News and Observer in 1954 printed that “The Home Demonstration Clubs of North Carolina are a vital part of our society.” Home Demonstration Clubs championed health issues of the day. Clubs state-wide promoted tuberculosis screenings by canvassing door-to-door and encouraged citizens to visit local X-rays mobiles. They encouraged women to get annual physicals, and they made women aware of the necessity for early cancer detection. Many members were involved in polio vaccine and blood mobile drives. Road safety was another issue taken up by home demonstration homemakers. Homemakers from Columbus County spearheaded state legislation that ultimately led to the painted white lines on the edge of roads. Other efforts brought about the identification of county roads and the erecting of road posts that named rural roads. As Extension Homemakers broadened their abilities and took on positions of leadership within their district and state organization, the North Carolina Federation of Home Demonstration Clubs, they saw a need to build
their own conference center on the NCSU campus. This need resulted in the creation of the building development fund that culminated with the building of the Jane S. McKimmon Continuing Education Center in 1976.

The sixties were all about change. The most significant change to Extension and to homemakers clubs of course came about because of integration. Home demonstration agents became Extension Home Economics Agents, and home demonstration clubs became Extension Homemaker Clubs after White and Negro home demonstration programs integrated. Extension homemakers modeled gracious acceptance in their communities as merges with integration took place. Along with social change came changes to population distribution. Demand for Extension education changed from predominately rural audiences to a demographic split of 50% urban and 50% rural. Addressing the needs of the poor became a focus of government and Extension. Extension agents worked to improve the nutritional needs of food stamp recipients and low-income families through education and implantation of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Program (EFNEP). Extension homemakers supported these efforts through neighbor-to-neighbor contacts, and encouraging low income families to participate in Extension programs.

As the seventies evolved, membership in Home Demonstration Clubs was in decline. Younger women were not joining Extension Homemaker clubs, primarily because they were choosing to work outside the home. To address lower memberships, many Extension homemaker clubs began to hold night meetings to accommodate working employed women. Even with fewer members, Extension Homemakers stayed in the public eye and remained relevant in their communities and counties. Clubs presented local community programs that focused on current social issues like, drug abuse among youth, air pollution and recycling. Extension Homemakers continued to support the federal EFNEP initiative and from 1971 until 1980, Extension Homemakers provided food and served as volunteer music and craft instructors for summer EFNEP day camps.

Family dynamics continued to change in the eighties and traditional Extension programs in food preservation, clothing construction, and home beautification made way for the contemporary concerns of economics, energy and environment. Double digit inflation, high interest rates and concerns for family resource management, particularly with more women in the work force, were hot topics that both Extension agents and Extension homemakers attacked in their counties. Extension homemakers went directly to shopping centers to educate consumers on consumer spending and offered smart buying tips. Energy and home environmental issues were significant matters of concern, as fuels became scarce and prices severely impacted family finances. Community programs promoted by Extension homemakers emphasized solutions saving on home energy, and water. They organized recycling drives, and even initiated some of the first recycling centers in the state.

The nineties brought rapid growth in technology and the birth of the World Wide Web forever changed the way information is disseminated and the way people communicate. Extension programming shifted from life skills to programs that focused on solutions to health, environment and economic wellbeing for the family. In 1995 in order to be more relevant to NC families Extension Home Economics Agents became Family and Consumer Sciences Agents. To rejuvenate their image the state-wide association, the North Carolina Extension Homemakers Association in turn, became the Extension and Community Association and is commonly referred
to as ECA. ECA sought to meet the modern needs of families. With an aging population, eldercare became a subject that Extension programs and ECA members addressed. ECA community efforts also emphasized automobile restraint systems for children, programs in family resource management and decision making, nutrition, and emergency preparedness. Since education had always been a major component of ECA, members state-wide routinely raised funds to award loans and scholarships to worthy students. In one two-year period alone, ECA records indicated that $362,745 was awarded for higher education financial support.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, prevalent issues facing families dealt with obesity, diabetes, heart disease, strokes, and cancer. Family and Consumer Sciences agents and ECA sought to educate the public on improving health. With instruction provided by their agents, ECA members sought venues to educate their communities in houses of faith, after school programs and in shopping centers. As the family structure continued to change, grandparents and other relatives raising children became an issue many families face. ECA promoted generational programs devised by Extension that offered families information and support to multi-generational families. As America once again became enmeshed in two wars, ECA again reached out to the military and their families. They collected thousands of manufacturers’ coupons that were shipped to military families here and abroad. They baked truckloads of baked goods and delivered them to NC military bases, and made thousands more care packages and shipped them to troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. When Medicare came out with Medicare Part-D, ECA members helped families make sense of the new program and enrolled senior citizens in the new drug plans.

The Extension and Community Association, both past and present, enabled the Cooperative Extension Service to carry out its mission of *empowering people, providing solutions* throughout the twentieth century, into the twenty-first. Their successes helped rural families make it through the dark depression era and the turbulent years of war. They furnished a social network of rural women that generated community leaders. ECA supported and promoted the education and welfare of their children and those less fortunate living around them. Their generosity improved the standard of living in their respective communities, and enabled families to send children to college. They graciously modeled social goodness and acceptance as social norms changed to a more divergent integrated society and as urbanization swallowed many of their rural communities. Through the leadership skills they gained in ECA, many members became community advocates and leaders, mayors and county commissioners. Perhaps, it is because of their successes and achievements that ECA no longer signify the contemporary community stature and prominence of their rural past. However, as the Cooperative Extension Service continues to remain a significant local entity and resource, it must pay tribute to the strong women who have backed Extension from the beginning; to the strong women who guided the Extension mission by bringing the needs of their communities to the Extension Service; to the strong women who were and still are Extension advocates, volunteers and advisors; and to the strong women who helped create the rich Extension heritage that will prolong Extension’s future in North Carolina: the Extension and Community Association.