1943-1953

The Early Years

The Washington Ethical Society (WES) was started in 1943 when the American Ethical Union (AEU) organized a meeting of members of other Ethical Societies who had come to Washington for the war effort. An earlier Washington Ethical Society had incorporated in 1918, but disbanded when most members returned home after World War I ended. Similarly, at the end of World War II, most WES members left Washington, leaving only 19 members in the fall of 1945. With significant help and encouragement from New York Leaders, the 19 remaining members decided to continue. WES was admitted as a member organization of the AEU in 1946. In 1947 George Beauchamp was admitted to the Fraternity of Leaders. He served as WES leader, without salary, from 1947 to 1957, while holding a full-time government job. In 1949 WES was officially incorporated. The articles of incorporation had three signers: L.D. MacIntyre, George Beauchamp, and Gustav Auzenne, Jr.

Our Founders

L.D. MacIntyre

George Beauchamp

Gustav Auzenne, Jr.

WES was an intentionally integrated community. Because Dr. Auzenne, a commerce and finance professor at Howard University, was an African American, WES had a hard time finding places to meet in segregated DC. For two years members met in the Dodge Hotel, followed by one year in the Friends Meeting House. To have adequate space for a Sunday School, they moved in 1946 to Friendship House at 619 D Street, SE. From 1950 to 1954, they met in the YWCA at 17 and K Streets., NW.

Social action activities during these years included picketing to integrate the YMCA Cafeteria (1947) and National Theater (1953) and successfully campaigned (1948/49) to end sectarian conduct of religious classes in Arlington public schools.

Dupont Circle Home

1954

Our Dupont Circle Home

After searching for a suitable property for several years, the Washington Ethical Society bought an old home at 1822 Massachusetts Avenue near Dupont Circle in 1954. Members remember climbing the stairs to the third floor, where Sunday School was held. The cost was $42,500 plus about $10,000 for renovation and equipment. After George Beauchamp retired to Florida in 1957, Ed Ericson was hired in 1959 as WES' first full-time Leader. His hiring was made possible by a total of $16,500 of grants from the AEU from 1959 through 1963. In 1963, a bequest from Nancy Jenison allowed the Society to pay off all loans, so that it owned the Dupont Circle house outright. The bequest also provided additional funds for future programs, so WES no longer had to depend on AEU grants.

1955-1957

We Are a Religion

In April 1955, WES received a letter stating that the DC Corporation Counsel had ruled that the WES meeting house was not entitled to exemption from real estate taxes, based upon a definition of religion as requiring a belief in a Supreme Being. The DC Tax Court judge ruled in October 1956 in favor of the city. The AEU raised $25,000 for an appeal fund. In October 1957, Judge Warren Burger (later to be appointed as U.S. Chief Justice) concluded for a unanimous panel that WES did indeed qualify as a religious society. The case was referenced in subsequent Supreme Court decisions concerning the religious rights of those without a belief in a Supreme Being.

Moving to 16th Street

In 1961, increased platform attendance and Sunday School enrollment made it clear that WES was outgrowing its first building. As an interim measure, WES rented facilities for platforms in fall 1962 at the Washington Theater Club and in 1963 at the Dupont movie theater. During those years, the whole Dupont Circle building was used for the Sunday School. In 1962, a committee examined where members lived and expected travel patterns when the beltway opened and recommended that WES relocate to the northern tip of DC.

1963

An opportunity came up to sell the Dupont Circle house in 1963 for a significant profit, thanks to one buyer's hope to own the entire block. The Leader and Board President became a hard-hitting negotiating team, holding out for a higher price—one that eventually allowed them to purchase an undeveloped plot of land in the Shepherd Park neighborhood. The 16th Street site was in the area covered by Neighbors Incorporated, a community organization working to combat real estate blockbusting and to maintain a racially integrated neighborhood.

1963-1966

Construction and Groundbreaking

Building construction took three years. The biggest challenge WES faced during that time was that the local construction unions were segregated and refused to open up apprentice opportunities to African Americans. After trying unsuccessfully to negotiate this issue, WES decided to use non-union contractors who were willing to employ African Americans. The unions threatened to picket. WES responded by erecting a large sign at the construction site that said, "Equal Opportunity Employer." The threatened picketing did not occur. Leader Ed Ericson, a union supporter his entire life, said this was the only time he went with non-union labor because "we were damned and determined we weren't going to support segregation."

1960s and beyond

Justice Gathering Place

Over the years, under the leadership of Ed Ericson through June 1971 and Don Montagna starting in 1972, the WES meeting house often hosted social action activities for WES and the wider community, including a Prison Art Show, fundraising for inner city drug treatment programs, and the locally famous Helping Hands Craft Sale. After the 1968 riots, the building served as the drop-off point for Marylanders bringing money for food and baby supplies that WES members purchased and delivered to burnt out areas of the city. During the Poor People's Campaign, the WES kitchen served for a time to supply food to the "mule train" of poor farmers from the deep South. During the Anti-Vietnam War marches, the WES building provided sleeping bag space for marchers from other Ethical Societies.

1968-2000

The Washington Ethical High School

In 1964, Swiss educator Leon Eberhard founded a school that moved into the WES building in 1968. In 1975, Mr. Eberhard retired and sold the school to a new corporation, with the majority of the board members appointed by WES, established to operate the school as the Washington Ethical Society School. Sally Fisher was hired as Head of School in 1981. In 1988, the school was renamed Washington Ethical High School, as it no longer had a formal affiliation with the Ethical Society but continued to be housed in the building. David Mullen was hired as Head of School in 1991. Due to the space and enrollment limitations of the WES building, the school began searching for property in the mid-1990s, culminating in the 2000 purchase of land in Silver Spring, where it is now known as The Nora School.

1980s

Paint it White

Leader Don Montagna recalls the controversy that wasn't—the decision in the 1980s to paint the building's plain concrete walls a more cheerful white color. Longtime members were sure that it ran counter to the original design of the building and were concerned about architectural integrity. But at a gathering after the fateful painting, retired Leader George Beauchamp, who had remained engaged during construction of the building, told the real story. The building was supposed to be made of white stone, and got switched to gray concrete because of a supply shortage. The coat of white paint over concrete block brought the building in line with the original, intended look.

"Where People Meet..."

Hanging over the stage in WES's Main Hall is a sign, stenciled with words from Felix Adler, the founder of Ethical Culture: "Where people meet to seek the highest is holy ground." These words are displayed in almost every Ethical Society in the country. A similar sign was in the Dupont Circle Meeting House. When the building was sold, this sign was taken down with the expectation that it would be placed in the new 16th Street meeting house. However, during the construction the sign was lost. Upon the death of former WES President L.D. MacIntyre, his children agreed to pay for the sign as a memorial to him. The sign was erected in the 1980s.

Remembering Our Loved Ones

The building and grounds of WES hold several memorials to celebrate members' lives. In 1998, 16-year-old Matthew Waymon was killed in a car accident with two other teens when leaving high school one afternoon. The facade of the WES building is where Matthew's parents Todd and Lynne dedicated a mosaic called "Tree of Life" by artist Mindy McCormick. Lynne and Todd also helped to create the Coming of Age-Matthew's Advance Teen Training (COA-MATT) program in their son's memory. William Nicholson passed away while serving as a Teen Group leader. In his memory the Board of Trustees purchased a cut leaf maple tree for the front lawn. The dedication ceremony was attended by his wife Jennifer Dreyfus and their children Corinne and Elena along with many WES teens and adults. Susan Runner donated a new sound system in the memory of her husband, Bernie Gold, and his passion for music.

2003-2005

Building Expansion Plans and the "Opening Doors" Campaign

In 2003, WES formed a Building Expansion Committee chaired by Ross Wells and Paula Beckman. They organized a feasibility study conducted in May 2004, which recommended a stretch fundraising goal of $775,000 with a loan of $225,000 to raise the roughly projected $1 million construction budget. In September 2004, WES launched the "Opening Doors: Our New Community Home" campaign, propelled by Community Leader Mary Herman and led by Julie Campbell, Peggy Goetz, Perry Saidman, and Ross Wells, with the help of many members-turned-fundraisers for the occasion. The campaign centered on a bold new vision to renovate the building with an elevator for accessibility and a connected space for community building. The estimated cost was almost $880,000.

The campaign came at a time of great transition for WES as Senior Leader Don Montagna left WES after 34 years, the congregation engaged Richard Nugent as Interim Leader, the congregation embarked on a search for a new Senior Leader, and WES began to explore co-affiliating with the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). The campaign served as a unifying effort that energized members.

2006

Close the Gap Campaign

A hot real estate market at the time more than doubled the estimated construction costs. WES held a special membership meeting in April 2006 and voted to go forward with construction plans despite the rising costs, including additional plans for a commercial kitchen, which would make the space more appealing for event rentals. The additional costs meant raising additional funds and taking on a $2 million mortgage. The "Close the Gap" Campaign raised more than a half-million dollars, bringing the total raised in two years to more than $1.4 million.

2007-2008

Groundbreaking of a New Era

Construction on the new addition began in 2007 and finished in January 2008. WES raised another $155,000 to build a commercial kitchen, which was added six months after the groundbreaking. This happened a few months before WES voted to affiliate with the Unitarian Universalist Association—while retaining our membership in the American Ethical Union—and then invited Amanda Poppei to become the Senior Leader.

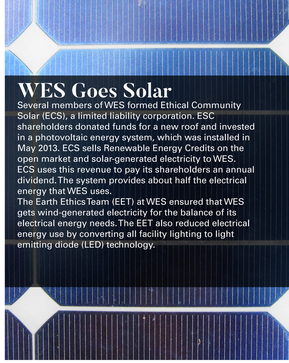
[PHOTO OF GROUNDBREAKING]

2013

"Burn the Mortgage" Campaign

In 2012, the community realized that the $2 million mortgage was placing a significant strain on its annual operating budget. In a feat of generosity and sheer will, the "Burn the Mortgage, Ignite the Future" campaign was organized by Stewardship Team members Peter Kent, Kris Maccubbin, and Perry Saidman. The campaign committee made visits to most WES members to personally invite them to take part in the campaign. The drive raised more than $1.3 million and succeeded in significantly reducing the size of the mortgage, freeing up WES to concentrate on its mission.

[Note: we have a list of names and photo of the campaign committee we can use, but may look odd if we don't have a similar list for the original campaign. Does anyone have that?]



WES Goes Solar

Several members of WES formed Ethical Community Solar (ECS), a limited liability corporation. ESC shareholders donated funds for a new roof and invested in a photovoltaic energy system, which was installed in May 2013. ECS sells Renewable Energy Credits on the open market and solar-generated electricity to WES. ECS uses this revenue to pay its shareholders an annual dividend. The system provides about half the electrical energy that WES uses.
The Earth Ethics Team (EET) at WES ensured that WES gets wind-generated electricity for the balance of its electrical energy needs. The EET also reduced electrical energy use by converting all facility lighting to light emitting diode (LED) technology.

2018

Recognizing History and Generosity

After the "Burn the Mortgage" campaign, the Stewardship Team began to explore the idea of recognizing the financial generosity that came out of both capital campaigns. Members of the Stewardship Team were inspired by stories of giving and wanted them to be more widely known in the community.

In the first campaign, WES members were making investments when they did not know what the future held for WES as it co-affiliated with the UUA and sought a new Senior Leader. While it has never expected for members to give beyond their means, that did not stop some members from dipping into children's college funds, postponing retirements, or making other significant sacrifices to make the new building and a lower mortgage a reality.

Listing names of financial donors is a cultural shift for WES. A basic Ethical Culture tenet is the inherent worth of every individual. WES is explicit in its belief that possessing financial means does not give anyone additional power or privilege in this community. Generosity in all forms is also a value at WES and we such stories to convey how important WES is in people's lives and to inspire future investments as the community grows and evolves.

We thank those whose generosity in adding to the legacy of this building has gone unrecognized.

These panels do not tell the whole story. Because WES has not recognized these types of investments in the past, history has been lost. We thank those whose generosity in adding to the legacy of this building has gone unrecognized. And we look forward to adding new panels to this display in the future.

Capital Campaign Lead Gifts

A total of 243 donors contributed to all three campaigns totaling almost $3 million. The following donors made "Lead Gifts," which raised more than 60 percent of the funds that made the renovations and mortgage reduction possible:

Perry Beider
John & Julie Campbell
Marcus Corbin & Caroline Russell
Julie Dröm & Ellen Kahn
Barry Galef & Ellen Post
Cayo Gamber & Sera Morgan
Mary Haber
Marty & Michelle Kaufman
Linda & David Keely
Peter Kent & Sharyn Neuwirth
Jo London
Lindsay Lucke
Christine Purcell
Bob Pokorny & Laura Bradshaw
Donna Radner
Carol Rawie
Susan Runner & Bernie Gold
Perry Saidman
Barbara Searle
Mary Blandin Smith
Laura Steele
Andy Stern
Hugh & Maureen Taft-Morales
Craig & Kate Thornton
Todd & Lynne Waymon
Ross Wells & Beth Baker