

Women-In-Action's Brand of Biracial Activism:  
The Politics of Race, Gender, and Class in 1960s-1970s Durham

Catherine Miller

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Dr. William Chafe and Dr. Karin Shapiro

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By 1968, racial tensions permeating the city of Durham, North Carolina, threatened to erupt into the kind of riots that had recently rocked cities across the United States. In this same year, however, the wife of a prominent black businessman in Durham established a biracial women's group to address the social issues that contributed to this climate of racial unrest. Elna Spaulding, backed by 125 other like-minded women, founded Women-In-Action for the Prevention of Violence and Its Causes in 1968 to address the roots and manifestations of Durham-area violence.<sup>1</sup> Operating under a particular conception of "violence," Women-In-Action initiated projects to open up lines of communication across racial and organizational barriers and to help diffuse the city's racial tensions. Through WIA's efforts to mediate an economic boycott, ease the transition to integrated schools, and refer citizens in need to proper resources, the organization contributed in meaningful ways to the Durham community. Yet the group's composition and the nature of its work illuminated the difficulties inherent in organizing across lines of race and class. Solidarity among members of WIA stemmed primarily from their shared socioeconomic status, solidifying a traditional and class-based style of women's organizing. Though Women-In-Action successfully transcended racial barriers, their particular brand of activism precluded the emergence of a true cross-class alliance; this class-restrictive element emerged as the organization's most significant limitation.

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<sup>1</sup> A variety of abbreviated names and acronyms were used to shorten the name of the organization, including Women-In-Action, WIA, WIAPV, and WIAPVC, among others. For consistency and ease of reading, I will refer to the group as Women-In-Action or WIA. The members of the organization referred to themselves variously by their given name (i.e. Elna Spaulding) or by their husband's name (i.e. Mrs. Asa T. Spaulding); the significance of naming practices will be discussed later in the essay. Generally, I refer to women in this paper by the name they designate for themselves in the particular source. In subsequent mentions, I refer to them by last name only (i.e. Spaulding).

## **A Call to Action: Embracing the Potential of Womanpower**

On August 21, 1968, Elna Spaulding placed a notice in the *Durham Morning Herald* calling on women of Durham to come together “in a project to eliminate violence in our lives.”<sup>2</sup> 125 women, black and white alike, answered Spaulding’s call; on September 4, this group of women met at the local YWCA and established the biracial organization Women-In-Action for the Prevention of Violence and Its Causes.<sup>3</sup> Two years later, the membership of the organization had swelled from this initial cadre of 125 women to 180, with an additional mailing list that reached several hundred more.<sup>4</sup> The racial make-up of WIA was split almost evenly between the two races, with black women comprising somewhere between forty and fifty percent of the group’s membership.<sup>5</sup>

Soon after its inception, Women-In-Action outlined the organization’s overarching structure and the mechanics of its day-to-day operations. In addition to selecting a board of directors, a board of officers, and an executive committee, WIA also established a number of subcommittees that would oversee the organization’s work in various community issues. According to the group’s “Guidelines for Sub-Committees,” each of these bodies needed to devise projects for its members to tackle as well as to “seek out information firsthand” about issues by talking to citizens and securing information from city and county agencies. One of the first guidelines in this document specified that the chairman and vice-chairman of each

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<sup>2</sup> Elna Spaulding, “Dear Editor,” newspaper article, *The Durham Herald*, August 21, 1968. Box 1, Folder 1, Women-in-Action for the Prevention of Violence and its Causes, Inc., Durham Chapter records, 1968-1998, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University. Collection hereafter abbreviated as WIA papers.

<sup>3</sup> Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 196.

<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Spaulding, “Highlights of 1970 – Report of the President,” January 11, 1971. Box 4, Folder 3, WIA papers.

<sup>5</sup> Christina Greene, “‘In the Best Interest of the Total Community’?: Women-in-Action and the Problems of Building Interracial, Cross-Class Alliances in Durham, North Carolina,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 16 (1996): 193.

committee should come from opposite races; in this way, WIA declared its commitment to biracialism from the start and incorporated this principle into the structure of its organization.<sup>6</sup>

In large part, one can trace the foundation of Women-In-Action to a conference held in New York two months earlier in July 1968. Over 200 representatives of women's organizations from across the country came together to attend a forum hosted by *McCall's*, a popular women's lifestyle magazine.<sup>7</sup> This conference focused on the theme "Womanpower-In-Action: Toward the Reduction of Violence." *McCall's* editor Lenore Hershey noted that such pressing social ills as "apathy and vigilantism and...destructive violence" prompted these women to gather together in a national forum in hopes of generating "positive alternatives" to these problems.<sup>8</sup> As one of the forum's attendees, Elna Spaulding participated in discussions surrounding these issues; the conference held sessions on "Violence and the Urban Crisis" and "Violence and Education," among other themes.<sup>9</sup>

The *McCall's* conference captured the growing tide of women's concern for social problems and their desire to act to combat them. The crux of women's potential to help stem the "current epidemic of violence" in the country lay in "find[ing] a way to cut across all divisions and to organize in a manner relevant to today's problems."<sup>10</sup> As explained by historian Christina Greene, *McCall's* intended to support small women's groups nationwide that would engage in short-term community projects to combat social ills. With this in mind, Spaulding returned to

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<sup>6</sup> "Guidelines for Sub-Committees," n.d. Box 9, Folder 5, WIA papers.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the history of *McCall's* magazine, see Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 205, 210-212. Zuckerman placed *McCall's* among a group of popular women's titles in the 1960s that also included *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Better Homes & Gardens*, and *Good Housekeeping*. This group was nicknamed the "Seven Sisters," a nod to the primarily female readership of these magazines as well as to their young staff members that often hailed from the all-female Seven Sister colleges.

<sup>8</sup> Lenore Hershey, "McCall's Editorials: Womanpower-In-Action: A Report to Our Readers on the McCall Forum: 'Toward the Reduction of Violence,'" n.d. Box 12, Folder 5, WIA papers.

<sup>9</sup> "The McCall Forum: Womanpower-In-Action Towards the Reduction of Violence: July 23-24, 1968," conference program. Box 12, Folder 5, WIA papers.

<sup>10</sup> Lenore Hershey, "McCall's Editorials: Womanpower-In-Action: A Report to Our Readers on the McCall Forum: 'Toward the Reduction of Violence,'" n.d. Box 12, Folder 5, WIA papers.

Durham intent on uniting women of all backgrounds in such an organization.<sup>11</sup> Although the conference did not explicitly state the need for these groups to be biracial in makeup, its designation of “interracial relations” as the top priority in stemming the tide of violence seemed to signal the need for biracial work. In this way, the *McCall’s* forum informed Spaulding’s understanding of women’s organizing and her commitment to reaching across racial lines to form Women-In-Action.

*McCall’s* outlined the centrality of womanpower specifically in the fight to reduce violence, a spirit echoed by the new Durham coalition founded by Spaulding. “The greatest power of all for good is theirs—woman power. No force on earth can stand against it,” declared a *McCall’s* editorial.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the very nature of women put them in the best position to become agents of harmony and order, according to the magazine; *McCall’s* lauded women’s unique ability “to see subtle connections and interrelationships,” a skill seen as integral to the fight against violence.<sup>13</sup> The members of Women-In-Action mirrored this sentiment, coalescing around the distinct potential of women to tackle community issues and ameliorate the causes and manifestations of violence.

### **Conceptualizing Violence in 1960s Durham**

The organization’s conceptualization of “violence” remained ill defined, but it encompassed a wide variety of social problems that these women sought to address. The Womanpower-In-Action Steering Committee, a national organization funded by the *McCall’s* Corporation and headquartered at the magazine’s national office, identified a diverse collection

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<sup>11</sup> Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 196.

<sup>12</sup> Editors of *McCall’s* magazine, “Womanpower-In-Action: A Progress Report,” n.d. Box 12, Folder 5, WIA papers.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

of problems to tackle in reducing “violence.”<sup>14</sup> These included education, housing, employment, police-community relations, gun control, and exploitation of violence in mass media, among others.<sup>15</sup> Not coincidentally, many of the sub-committees of Durham’s new women’s coalition focused on these issues. Thus the program of the *McCall’s* organization inspired and guided the fledgling program of Women-In-Action to a broad conceptualization of violence, which transcended mere physical manifestations. The organization recognized that a variety of social problems had the potential to breed violence or racial tension, and that all of these issues needed to be addressed in their work.

Yet the singular issue of “interracial relations” stood at the top of the *McCall’s* list, and it also formed the heart of the WIA’s agenda. Preventing violence became intimately tied to improving the state of race relations in Durham, which remained in a state of heightened tension at the time of the organization’s inception. Racial tensions and conflict permeated the city in 1968; Christina Greene identified the April assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the ensuing wave of arson attacks and other violent confrontations as factors contributing to an atmosphere “ripe for increased racial violence.”<sup>16</sup> Yet events throughout the mid-1960s—both local and national—laid the foundation for the racial unrest that hovered over Durham in 1968.

In her book *The Best of Enemies*, Osha Gray Davidson traced the roots of 1968’s racial climate to the summertime riots that had rocked urban centers across the United States since 1965. Fears that such urban unrest would spread to Durham contributed to an atmosphere of tension in the city by the spring of 1967.<sup>17</sup> That summer, city officials decided to build a new

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<sup>14</sup> The Womanpower-In-Action Steering Committee also served to provide support to small women’s groups nationwide that tackled local issues of violence, including Women-In-Action. See Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 196.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Kersey Harvey, “A Call to Action,” n.d. Box 12, Folder 5, WIA papers.

<sup>16</sup> Greene, ““In the Best Interest of the Total Community’?,” 193.

<sup>17</sup> Osha Gray Davidson, *The Best of Enemies: Race & Redemption in the New South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 193.

public housing complex on Bacon Street, located adjacent to a lower-income black community. Feeling that the complex would further centralize poverty into this single area, local blacks lamented this placement of public housing as “just another instance of being herded into ghettos.”<sup>18</sup> This and other housing-related grievances prompted local activists to organize demonstrations in protest of the city’s broader urban renewal policies. After a few young participants in a July 1967 demonstration began to throw rocks that broke windows and struck a policeman, mayor R. Wensell Grabarek responded by calling in the National Guard and state Highway Patrol. Organizers answered this escalation by calling for a march on July 20th.<sup>19</sup>

Davidson, as well as historians Robert R. Korstad and James L. Leloudis, documented the national events occurring simultaneously with these local Durham incidents that heightened the racial tensions in the city. As black activists called for demonstrations and voiced their demands, Grabarek and other city officials increasingly feared the possibility of mass insurrection and unrest. Newark, New Jersey, still smoldered from the race riot that had recently taken place around the same time as the July 1967 protests in Durham.<sup>20</sup> The local press seized on this connection, with a large headline in the *Durham Herald* declaring, “Another ‘Newark’ Threatened Here.”<sup>21</sup> This charged climate carried over into 1968, when the aftermath of King’s assassination and wave of arson attacks only intensified an already acute atmosphere of racial tension.

Another major event impacted the state of race relations in Durham at the time of WIA’s inception: the black economic boycott campaign. The Black Solidarity Committee for Community Improvement (BSC), an organization devoted to the concerns of the lower class,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>19</sup> Robert R. Korstad and James L. Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs: The North Carolina Fund and the Battle to End Poverty and Inequality in 1960s America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 226.

<sup>20</sup> Davidson, *The Best of Enemies*, 195; Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 302-303.

<sup>21</sup> Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 226.

conceived of the boycott in 1968 after requests for better conditions and increased representation in local agencies fell on deaf ears. On July 28, 1968, the BSC submitted a fifteen-page memorandum to Durham's Chamber of Commerce and Merchants Association.<sup>22</sup> This document enumerated the demands of the city's black population and addressed a wide swath of issues, including education, employment, black representation, welfare, private and public housing, and recreation.<sup>23</sup> Beyond merely stating their demands, the BSC also outlined "the consequences of inaction," which included a buying boycott targeting select white-owned stores in Durham. But the BSC also planned to turn to public demonstrations and civil disobedience if Durham city officials remained unresponsive to their demands.<sup>24</sup> The onset of the boycott in July 1968, a campaign that would last nearly seven months and cost the targeted businesses nearly a million dollars in lost sales, contributed to racial tensions in Durham at the time of WIA's inception that September.<sup>25</sup>

Intimately linked with strained race relations in the minds of the women of WIA, poverty represented a second critical issue that contributed to an atmosphere of tension in Durham. Several organizations operating in Durham had coalesced around poverty and other conditions of the city's lower-income population in the mid-1960s, including Operation Breakthrough and its offshoot, United Organizations for Community Improvement (UOCI). Chartered in 1964, Operation Breakthrough functioned as "a conventional, top-down approach to poverty reduction that focused on the rehabilitation of poor families and individual self-improvement."<sup>26</sup> According to this model, teams of professional social workers would work with target families to develop

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<sup>22</sup> Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County: A History of Durham County, North Carolina*, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 373.

<sup>23</sup> "Memorandum – from the Black Solidarity Committee for Community Improvement, to Chamber of Commerce and Merchants Association of the City of Durham," n.d. Box 12, Folder 1, WIA papers.

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, *Durham County*, 373.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 178.



plans for combating poverty, and then the families themselves—assisted by community volunteers—would seek out local social services to implement these plans.<sup>27</sup>

But by January 1966, many of Operation Breakthrough’s directors and a large collection of its members had recognized the limitations of this top-down model and devised a new approach for addressing poverty in Durham. Together they split off from Operation Breakthrough and formed a separate group called United Organizations for Community Improvement (UOCI). Structured as a coalition of fifteen neighborhood associations based in low-income areas, UOCI aimed to put poorer residents in charge of their own anti-poverty initiatives. This confederation also gave activists the freedom to engage in direct action measures more controversial than had been allowed in Operation Breakthrough.<sup>28</sup> Women comprised nearly eighty percent of UOCI’s membership, and one of these activists in particular played an integral role in organizing poor black women around issues of housing and welfare.<sup>29</sup>

Ann Atwater knew firsthand about the problems with welfare services and poverty programs, as she had collected welfare services herself on an intermittent basis throughout her life.<sup>30</sup> Along with many other low-income black women in Durham, Atwater joined Operation Breakthrough and became involved in efforts to ameliorate housing conditions among the low-income population. In early 1967, Operation Breakthrough recognized her potential as an organizer and sponsored her in a four-month training course as a community action technician.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Among the members of Operation Breakthrough’s steering committee were Kenneth Royall and James Semans, whose wives were members of WIA, and Durham mayor R. Wensell Grabarek. See Anderson, *Durham County*, 357.

<sup>28</sup> Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 189.

<sup>29</sup> Greene, ““In the Best Interest of the Total Community’?,” 192.

<sup>30</sup> Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 184.

<sup>31</sup> Davidson, *The Best of Enemies*, 182-183.

When UOCI split from Operation Breakthrough, Atwater joined the new coalition as a leading canvasser and eventually chaired UOCI's Housing Committee.<sup>32</sup>

Informed by the activism of Ann Atwater and others involved in issues affecting Durham's lower-class population, the members of Women-In-Action understood the importance of tackling lower-class issues like welfare and housing. WIA's conceptualization of violence, therefore, concentrated on the systemic problems of both racism and poverty that bred interracial tensions in 1960s Durham. In order to "prevent violence and its causes," then, WIA needed to address these systemic social problems. Ultimately, the organization's record in directly tackling these issues and bettering the conditions of the lower classes remained mixed. Yet Women-In-Action successfully identified a broad spectrum of community problems to address in their work, mirroring the concerns of lower-class activists and groups like Operation Breakthrough and UOCI.

### **Solidifying a United Coalition**

With these objectives in mind, Women-In-Action established itself as an organization committed to tackling the social problems affecting the whole of the Durham community. The group felt it could best serve Durham by studying the city's problems and providing a much-needed forum for communication among conflicting groups. WIA thus envisioned its primary role in the community as a mediator between the various voices in Durham affairs, black and white alike. In a document explaining the role of the organization, Elna Spaulding pointed out the dearth of groups "working for mediation and reconciliation" and their necessity to resolving the city's "emotional problems and conflicts."<sup>33</sup> Women-In-Action viewed itself as a nonpartisan

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<sup>32</sup> Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 115.

<sup>33</sup> Elna Spaulding, "The Role of Our Organization," n.d. Box 3, Folder 9, WIA papers.

mediator whose sub-committees and public forums provided a space to examine all sides of community issues.<sup>34</sup>

Beyond merely facilitating communication between races and constituencies, the organization aimed to cultivate genuine understanding between these groups. To accomplish this, Women-In-Action coordinated various projects meant to generate community-wide interest and participation. In June 1969, the white-owned and generally conservative *Durham Sun* publicized one such endeavor, a pilot recreation project based at the Few Gardens low-income housing project. As quoted in this piece, Elna Spaulding believed that bringing together multiple sectors of the community assisted in “changing attitudes and helping the community to understand other people’s problems.”<sup>35</sup> In another project meant to foster this kind of understanding, the WIA Human Relations Committee sponsored a sidewalk student art show in May 1970 that displayed artwork adhering to several themes, including “All Hands Together for Harmony” and “Durham is Ours to Build Together--Not to Destroy Separately.” The committee hoped that the art show would “contribute to the enrichment of life in our community through better understanding.”<sup>36</sup>

This commitment to fostering mutual awareness and concern also applied to relations among WIA members themselves. By nature of their decision to join the organization, these women acknowledged the importance of cross-racial contact in the quest to ameliorate social ills. But the members of WIA also recognized that in order to make this interracial coalition effective, they needed to learn more about their fellow members of the opposite race. Mrs. Audrey Burt, the black chairman of the Employment Sub-Committee, expressed this sentiment in the committee’s annual report in 1969: “We have found that we know very little about one another

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<sup>34</sup> “Women-In-Action for the Prevention of Violence and its Causes, Inc.,” pamphlet, n.d. Box 3, Folder 9, WIA papers.

<sup>35</sup> “Volunteers Asked For New Recreation Setup,” newspaper article, *The Durham Sun*, June 14, 1969. Box 9, Folder 4, WIA papers.

<sup>36</sup> “The Children Speak Through Art,” pamphlet, n.d. Box 9, Folder 8, WIA papers.

(racially) and are attempting to close that gap. We feel that it would be futile to work on any extensive project together with so little understanding of one another.”<sup>37</sup> In their 1972 report, the co-chairmen of the Membership Committee, Mrs. Charles Wilson and Mrs. R. P. Randolph, underscored the importance of informal get-togethers like coffees and teas held in members’ homes to get to know one another. But this report also conceded the difficulty of this task: “We are frank to admit that having multi-racial meetings may be a little difficult as perhaps our acquaintance with other races is limited.”<sup>38</sup>

Despite their limited contact with the opposite race before joining Women-In-Action, these women understood the importance of forging cross-racial relationships within the group. If they hoped to foster a climate of racial acceptance in Durham, these women needed to serve as a model of interracial cooperation themselves. Since Elna Spaulding had founded the organization as an explicitly biracial one, Women-In-Action possessed a biracial membership from its inception. Christina Greene argued in her book *Our Separate Ways* that Spaulding’s identity as a prominent black leader in the Durham community played a large role in attracting black women to the organization. In this way, WIA concerned itself with black women’s interests from the outset and thus distinguished itself even among other interracial groups of the time.<sup>39</sup>

The members of this biracial coalition found a baseline for solidarity in a shared set of values that enabled them to bridge racial differences. Greene pointed to their shared attitudes concerning motherhood and domesticity as the driving force for members to get involved in the work of WIA; this unity, forged along traditional notions of womanhood, enabled members of both races to identify with each other and transcend racial divides. Traditional values of maternalism and respectability held by these women were largely rooted in their shared

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<sup>37</sup> Mrs. Audrey Burt, “Annual Report of the Employment Committee, 1969.” Box 9, Folder 4, WIA papers.

<sup>38</sup> “Report, Membership Committee, 1-10-72.” Box 9, Folder 19, WIA papers.

<sup>39</sup> Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 197-199.

socioeconomic class. The majority of WIA members came from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, which informed their conceptions of womanhood and maternal activism. This “convergence of gender and class” provided a basis of solidarity among the members of Women-In-Action that transcended the color line.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Demographics of Biracialism: Class Shortcomings in WIA**

Just as socioeconomic class emerged as the most salient factor uniting the members of Women-In-Action, class also became the single biggest obstacle to the organization’s effectiveness. According to the organization’s “Statement of Purpose and Policy,” WIA intended to “strive for a balanced representation of all segments of the community population.”<sup>41</sup> The organization purported to value a racially and socioeconomically “balanced” character, but it failed to incorporate poor or working-class women—white or black—into its ranks. WIA’s official documents published throughout its tenure did not indicate this class gap; on the contrary, its publications continually lauded the organization’s inclusivity. For instance, an open letter written by Elna Spaulding in 1970 characterized Women-In-Action as a group of citizens “from all segments of the Durham population, both horizontally and vertically—cutting across racial and social lines and all economic levels.”<sup>42</sup> Likewise, Spaulding frequently cited the racially and economically integrated identity of Women-In-Action in press releases and grant applications directed to local agencies, in part to bolster the case for increased financial support.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 197-198.

<sup>41</sup> “Statement of Purpose and Policy,” n.d. Box 3, Folder 9, WIA papers.

<sup>42</sup> Open letter from Mrs. Asa T. Spaulding, “Women-In-Action Receives \$5000 Grant,” December 29, 1970. Box 5, Folder 3, WIA papers.

<sup>43</sup> “Funding Request for an Information and Referral Service to Durham, Submitted to The Durham United Fund, June 1973.” Box 5, Folder 3, WIA papers; Mrs. A. T. Spaulding, “An Appeal to the Durham County Board of Commissioners For Financial Support, February 19, 1973,” press release. Box 6, Folder 3, WIA papers.

Materials written by external entities also echoed this description of Women-In-Action as a cross-class organization. In September 1970, *The Durham Sun* published an article in recognition of an award bestowed on Spaulding by the Carolinas Region of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. The citation award, presented in this headline as a “brotherhood award,” honored Spaulding for her work with Women-In-Action. The article characterized the organization’s membership as “black and white; rich, middle class and poor; Christians and Jews; churchgoers and nonchurchgoers.”<sup>44</sup> Thus the portrayal of WIA as an all-inclusive organization proliferated beyond the coalition’s own materials.

Despite its stated policy to ensure a balanced class composition, Women-In-Action failed to attract lower-income Durham women into its general ranks, let alone its leadership structure. The majority of its members, both white and black, hailed from the middle and upper classes.<sup>45</sup> Women-In-Action attracted to its ranks several wives of prominent politicians and businessmen in the community. Among the board of directors were such well-to-do women as Mrs. George W. Miller, the wife of a Durham County representative in the North Carolina General Assembly, and Mrs. Emmanuel J. Evans, whose husband served as the city’s progressive mayor between 1951 and 1963.<sup>46</sup> As for wives of notable Durham business owners, the membership of WIA included Mildred Amey, whose husband William Amey, Jr., owned and operated a prominent black funeral home.<sup>47</sup> Elna Spaulding herself belonged to Durham’s black business elite; her

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<sup>44</sup> “Her Work Merits Brotherhood Award,” newspaper article, *The Durham Sun*, September 10, 1970. Box 7, Folder 1, WIA papers.

<sup>45</sup> Greene, ““In the Best Interest of the Total Community?,”” 194.

<sup>46</sup> Anderson, *Durham County*, 336, 381.

<sup>47</sup> Gary Kueber, “401 Pine/South Roxboro – Wm. Amey Funeral Home,” Open Durham, <http://opendurham.org/buildings/401-pine-south-roxboro-wm-amey-funeral-home?full>.

husband Asa served as president of the North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company, perhaps the most distinguished black business in Durham at the time, from 1958 to 1968.<sup>48</sup>

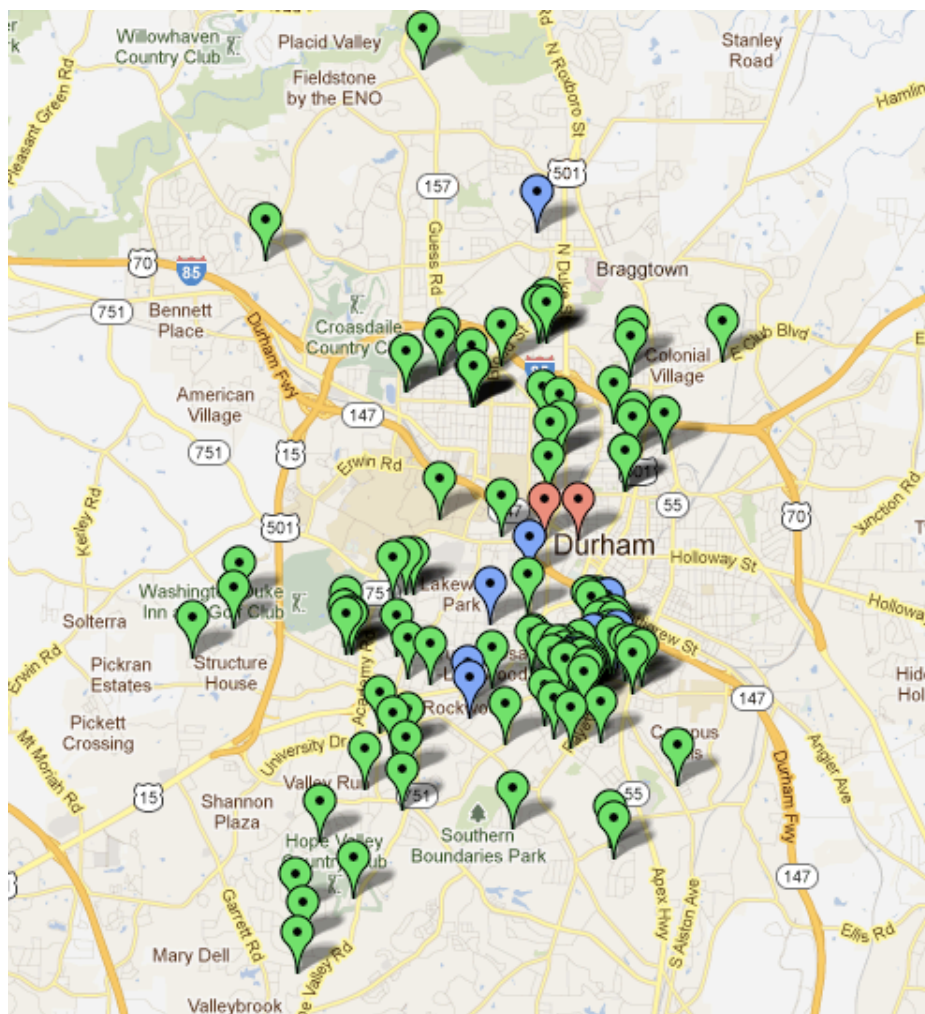
The WIA membership list from 1970 and the lists of WIA's board of directors, officers, and executive committee from 1971 provided a glimpse of the demographics of membership.<sup>49</sup>

By mapping out where these women lived, one can identify spatial clusters of members concentrated in particular historic Durham neighborhoods. Based on information about the socioeconomic status of residents in these particular neighborhoods, one can clarify the class makeup of the organization as a whole. The following map indicates the home residences of WIA's members and board of directors in 1970-1971:

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<sup>48</sup> William J. Kennedy, Jr., *The North Carolina Mutual Story: A Symbol of Progress 1898-1970* (Durham, NC: North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, 1970), 198-200. Before serving as the company's fifth president, Spaulding held various positions throughout his nearly thirty-five-year career with North Carolina Mutual. He also served as a member or trustee for a variety of community groups, including the North Carolina Council of Churches and the Durham Bi-Racial Human Relations Committee.

<sup>49</sup> See Box 3, Folder 2, WIA papers.

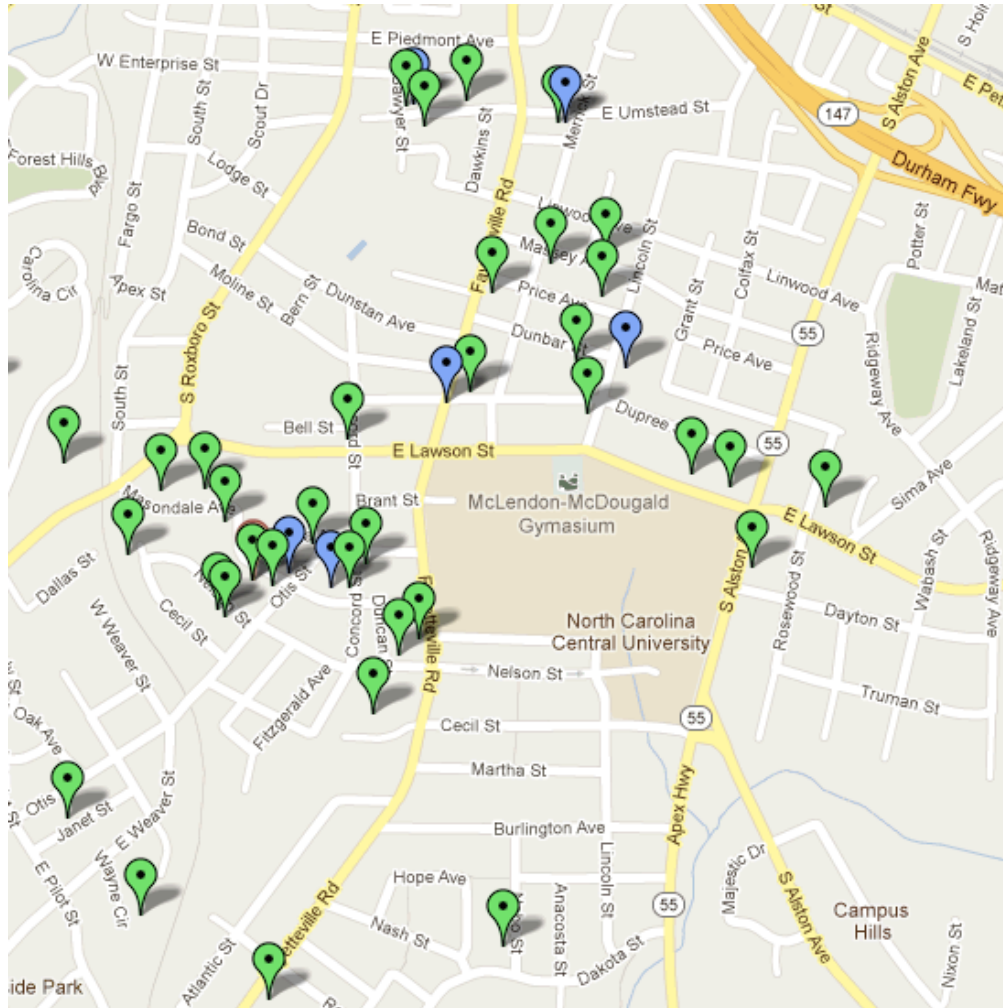


Homes of WIA members from 1970 (green labels) and board of directors for 1971 (blue labels). WIA meeting spaces are also marked in red. Map generated by author. May be accessed online at <http://g.co/maps/vwwxg>.

According to this map, the Southeast Durham neighborhood housed the largest cluster of WIA members at that time. Also known as the Fayetteville Street Corridor, this area developed around the campus of North Carolina Central University and became home to a large concentration of African-American businessmen, professors, and other professionals.<sup>50</sup> The following close-up view of the previous map shows the spatial distribution of members in Southeast Durham:

<sup>50</sup> "Guide to Historic Neighborhoods," Preservation Durham, <http://preservationdurham.org/places/nhoods.html>.





Homes of WIA members and board of directors in the Southeast Durham neighborhood. Map generated by author. May be accessed online at <http://g.co/maps/vwwxg>.

According to *The Durham Architectural and Historic Inventory* published by the City of Durham in 1982, the growth of a black hospital, university, and business community in Southeast Durham in the early twentieth century contributed to the emergence of a large black middle- and upper-middle class black population in this area.<sup>51</sup> Elna Spaulding and nearly all of the other black board of directors for WIA lived in this neighborhood, including Mrs. Bessie McLaurin, Mrs. Eula P. Harris, Dr. Rose B. Browne, Mrs. R.C.W. Perry, and Mrs. R. P. Randolph. As part of the successful black business community, WIA member Mildred Amey and

<sup>51</sup> Claudia P. Roberts, *The Durham Architectural and Historic Inventory* (Durham, NC: The City of Durham, 1982), 117.

her family resided there as well. These women, in addition to the approximately thirty other black members of Women-In-Action who lived in Southeast Durham, belonged to the higher socioeconomic echelons of Durham's black population. The WIA-affiliated residents of this "fashionable neighborhood," then, contributed to the middle- and upper-class character of the organization.<sup>52</sup>

The white membership of Women-In-Action was also concentrated in wealthier neighborhoods across Durham. Mrs. James Wyngaarden, one of the white members of the WIA board of directors and the wife of the chief of surgery at Duke University Hospital, lived in the richest of the city's neighborhoods.<sup>53</sup> Morehead Hill, characterized by large, elegant family homes, historically attracted illustrious Durham businessmen and executives.<sup>54</sup> Mrs. Wyngaarden certainly came from an upper-class background, as did several other women in the organization who lived in other wealthy Durham neighborhoods. WIA member Mrs. James E. Davis, whose husband worked as a well-respected surgeon and served as president of the American Medical Association, lived in the nearby Forest Hills community.<sup>55</sup> The luxury residences in this exclusive country club neighborhood housed prominent white professionals and businessmen as well as the families of several WIA members.<sup>56</sup> Another member of the WIA board of directors, Mary Duke Biddle Trent Semans, lived at the northeastern edge of Forest Hills.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Roberts, *The Durham Inventory*, 119.

<sup>53</sup> Anderson, *Durham County*, 404.

<sup>54</sup> Roberts, *The Durham Inventory*, 233-235.

<sup>55</sup> Anderson, *Durham County*, 403.

<sup>56</sup> Roberts, *The Durham Inventory*, 284; "Guide to Historic Neighborhoods," Preservation Durham, <http://preservationdurham.org/places/nhoods.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Mary D.B.T. Semans was a prominent social activist in Durham and is often credited as a co-founder of Women-In-Action. But she remains largely absent from the WIA chapter records, indicating that she did not assume a day-to-day role in the organization. Unfortunately, the Semans Family Papers in the Duke University archives were closed to the public at the time this essay was written. This collection might reveal additional insight into Semans' role in Women-In-Action.

Other clusters of wealthy white members belonged to the Duke Forest and Hope Valley neighborhoods in the southwestern area of Durham. Duke University had developed the strictly residential Duke Forest neighborhood in the 1930s to attract professors to its faculty, and nearly all the WIA members who lived in Duke Forest were wives of Duke professors.<sup>58</sup> Dorothy B. Bone's husband, for example, belonged to the faculty of the music department and conducted the Duke Symphony Orchestra.<sup>59</sup> Other faculty wives in Duke Forest included Mrs. Richard Watson and Mrs. George White. Extending southward along Hope Valley Road from the Forest Hills neighborhood, the country club suburb of Hope Valley also housed a solid cluster of white WIA members.<sup>60</sup> All of these women belonged to Durham's white upper class.

Other clusters of WIA women lived in the Trinity Park and Watts Hospital neighborhoods on the northern end of Durham, which were also home to predominantly middle- and upper-middle-class white families.<sup>61</sup> But one largely white neighborhood was not represented among the members of Woman-In-Action: East Durham. The largest and most densely populated areas in Durham, East Durham's residents primarily belonged to the white working class.<sup>62</sup> The absence of WIA members from this neighborhood evidenced one of the class-orientated shortcomings of the organization: its inability to recruit lower-income white women into its ranks. Christina Greene referred to this absence of lower-class whites within WIA, but her analysis of the group's class gap focused more heavily on the alienation of black lower-class women.<sup>63</sup> The neighborhoods housing these poorer black women also remained devoid of WIA members; none came from historically black-dominated, lower-income

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<sup>58</sup> Roberts, *The Durham Inventory*, 299.

<sup>59</sup> Anderson, *Durham County*, 397.

<sup>60</sup> Roberts, *The Durham Inventory*, 291.

<sup>61</sup> See Roberts, *The Durham Inventory*, 197-201, 263-265 for general descriptions of Trinity Park and Watts Hospital.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-86.

<sup>63</sup> Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 199-207.

neighborhoods like Crest Street and East End.<sup>64</sup> Socioeconomic class rather than race seemed to remain at the heart of the exclusion of low-income women regardless of their race; in an organization dominated by upper-middle and upper-class women, class defined solidarity among members.

Yet WIA recognized the need to reach out to lower-income women in order to gain a better grasp on community issues. An early outreach attempt came in October 1968, when Women-In-Action held an orientation panel entitled “Techniques for Constructive Interaction with the Underprivileged.” Among the participants in the panel was Ann Atwater, an activist affiliated with the United Organizations for Community Improvement (UOCI) who had spent years embroiled in issues surrounding public and private housing. Women-In-Action intended to host a series of similar panels to discuss community issues and obtain “a balanced view of the situations and/or conditions in [the] community.”<sup>65</sup> At the same time, however, many members of Women-In-Action remained unenthusiastic about projects that sought to directly confront the realities and conditions of lower-class life. The January 1971 report from the Housing Committee, for example, discussed its members’ lack of interest in potentially sponsoring a low-income housing project in Durham.<sup>66</sup>

Although they publicly maintained the illusion of an inter-class alliance, Women-In-Action did discuss its class gap internally among its members. In a report issued in 1972, the Membership Committee admitted its failure to attract lower-income women to the organization’s ranks and solicited advice on how to remedy this situation.<sup>67</sup> Acknowledgement of the problem aside, Women-In-Action never worked out a solution to this internal class issue and its

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<sup>64</sup> For descriptions of East End and Crest Street, see Roberts, 76-77, 163-165.

<sup>65</sup> “WIAPV to Conduct Orientation Panel,” Oct. 1, 1968. Box 6, Folder 6, WIA papers.

<sup>66</sup> “Report of Housing Committee, 1/11/71.” Box 9, Folder 7, WIA papers.

<sup>67</sup> “Report, Membership Committee, 1972.” Box 9, Folder 10, WIA papers.

membership continued to represent only the upper echelons of Durham society. The fact that WIA ultimately failed to incorporate low-income women of both races points to the limits of the organization's brand of interracialism. Unity in WIA between black and white seemed to hinge on shared socioeconomic status, a dimension that cemented a class-restrictive form of biracial cooperation. It seemed the Elna Spauldings and Mary D.B.T. Semans of Durham could not find a point of solidarity with the city's Ann Atwaters.

The organization's failure to forge a true cross-class alliance undercut its effectiveness in addressing community issues, particularly housing. In 1970, Durham's white and black populations remained at odds over the city's urban renewal plan, which prompted the destruction of black-owned homes and businesses to make way for white-controlled economic ventures and real estate.<sup>68</sup> Urban renewal forced blacks into substandard housing projects whose landlords charged inflated rents, conditions that spurred lower-income black women into action. UOCI in particular took on this housing crisis early on, organizing tenants in demonstrations against these conditions.<sup>69</sup> In her examination of WIA's role in the housing controversy, Greene pointed out the relationship between two particular members that embodied the complicated nature of WIA's involvement. The daughter of Mrs. Julia Lucas, a black member of Women-In-Action, worked with UOCI to organize a prolonged demonstration against white slumlord Abe Greenberg, whose wife Blue was also in WIA.

These women apparently got along well enough to work together on several committees, but Lucas nevertheless remained a vocal critic of the organization's seemingly shallow involvement in issues of low-income housing. She urged her fellow WIA members to go beyond the "superficial solutions" offered by WIA, which focused more on beautification projects at the

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<sup>68</sup> Anderson, *Durham County*, 342-344.

<sup>69</sup> Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 193-194.

housing projects than on deep engagement with the tenants and their problems. But class differences still prevented the women of UOCI and WIA from relating to each other and working together on housing issues.<sup>70</sup> WIA's Housing Committee reported the frustrations it encountered in dealing with the housing crisis, citing "the magnitude of the problem and the complexities involved in finding solutions" in its January 1971 report.<sup>71</sup> Evidence of these difficulties was perhaps found in the fluctuations of leadership that plagued the Housing Committee. Several early white leaders of this committee resigned their post, including onetime chairman Mrs. Willa Johnson and vice-chairman Mrs. Louis D. Quin.<sup>72</sup> Both white women and black women of Durham's upper echelons bought into urban renewal and stood to gain from its initiatives, impeding the potential for solidarity between WIA members and the city's lower classes. Thus the middle- and upper-class character of Women-In-Action undercut its ability to constructively tackle this particular community issue.

### **WIA's Unique Place in a Network of Grassroots Coalitions**

The fact that Women-In-Action addressed housing at all, let alone devoted an entire sub-committee to housing issues, attested to the organization's commitment to social problems that affected the entire Durham community, poor and working-class people included. The group's committees and projects centered on such diverse issues as civic improvement, education, welfare, recreation, and juvenile delinquency. Despite the organization's inability to connect in solidarity with low-income women, its agenda nonetheless reflected that of other grassroots coalitions concerned mainly with lower-class issues and whose membership came predominantly from the lower class. The female activists of Operation Breakthrough and UOCI had "defined

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<sup>70</sup> Greene, "'In the Best Interest of the Total Community'?", 202-204.

<sup>71</sup> "Report of Housing Committee, 1/11/71." Box 9, Folder 7, WIA papers.

<sup>72</sup> See Box 9, Folder 7, WIA papers.

the movement direction of the freedom movement in Durham,” and Women-In-Action had no choice but to follow the path shaped by these hubs of lower-class activism.<sup>73</sup>

In addition to the work of groups like Operation Breakthrough and UOCI, the members of Women-In-Action drew inspiration from a tradition of women’s civic organizing in Durham. Many of WIA’s members had already been involved in women’s voluntary organizations like the League of Women Voters, the National Council of Negro Women, and the Young Women’s Christian Association. By the 1960s, these and other female-dominated groups had increasingly taken up issues like race relations, housing, poverty, and education.<sup>74</sup> WIA members continued to maintain their commitments to these various civic groups, and such connections assisted WIA in their efforts to increase their ranks. The Membership Committee urged the coalition’s members to reach out to other groups they belonged to, including garden clubs, church societies, and “social groups of all kinds” in order to solicit potential new members for WIA.<sup>75</sup> The organization also encouraged its members to use their various Durham affiliations to further Women-In-Action’s own goals for better race relations. For example, three WIA members successfully integrated the Garden Clubs of Durham and the Durham Council of Garden Clubs in 1971, which Women-In-Action viewed as “an important step forward in racial relations.”<sup>76</sup>

Recognizing the importance of these connections and the role of other groups in advancing their same mission, Women-In-Action worked in concert with many other agencies and individuals. WIA newsletters frequently highlighted other community organizations that “help[ed] people help themselves,” including Operation Breakthrough and United Organization

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<sup>73</sup> Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 200.

<sup>74</sup> Greene, ““In the Best Interest of the Total Community’?,” 195.

<sup>75</sup> “Report, Membership Committee, 1972.” Box 9, Folder 10, WIA papers.

<sup>76</sup> “Annual Report, Civic Improvement Sub-Committee, 1-1-71 to 1-1-72.” Box 8, Folder 7, WIA papers.

for Community Improvement.<sup>77</sup> A newsletter issued by the Communications Committee in December 1969 featured the meeting times, functions, and directors of various Durham public boards, such as the Regional Planning Commission and the Finance Committee, ostensibly to encourage WIA members to learn more about community issues through direct engagement with these public bodies.<sup>78</sup> Also in 1969, representatives from the Human Relations Committee met with Durham's then-mayor R. Wensell Grabarek to discuss issues of housing and black unemployment.<sup>79</sup> Rather than competing with other Durham organizations and agencies, then, Women-In-Action saw its role as complementary to these other groups and individuals.<sup>80</sup>

This willingness and commitment to reach out to a variety of constituencies served Women-In-Action well, particularly in the role the organization assumed during the 1968 black economic boycott. Soon after WIA's founding, Spaulding crafted a proposal calling for a series of panels to discuss the boycott and other community issues. By extending panel invitations to representatives of a diverse group of organizations, including the Black Solidarity Committee, the Durham Merchants Association, and the Durham Chamber of Commerce, WIA hoped to gain exposure to all sides of the boycott issue in an effort to better facilitate mediation among the various camps. Such a panel would thus place Women-In-Action "in a better position...to render a constructive service to all parties concerned" and the Durham community as a whole.<sup>81</sup>

In an appeal for financial support submitted to the Durham County Board of Commissioners in 1973, Spaulding highlighted the organization's role in successfully mediating the cessation of the boycott. Thanks in part to the open forum hosted by Women-In-Action,

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<sup>77</sup> "Newsletter, February 2, 1970." Box 6, Folder 2, WIA papers.

<sup>78</sup> "Communications Committee Newsletter, December 8, 1969." Box 6, Folder 2, WIA papers.

<sup>79</sup> "Report of Projects and Activities of the Human Relations Subcommittee of WIAPV for 1968-69." Box 9, Folder 8, WIA papers. Grabarek was elected mayor in 1963 after running on "a platform of moderation in race relations," according to Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 177.

<sup>80</sup> Mrs. A. T. Spaulding, "An Appeal to the Durham County Board of Commissioners For Financial Support, February 19, 1973," press release. Box 6, Folder 3, WIA papers.

<sup>81</sup> Mrs. Asa T. Spaulding, "A Proposal by the President," October 26, 1968. Box 4, Folder 3, WIA papers.



racial tensions in the city were tempered and the grievances that sparked the boycott were settled.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, its assistance in mediating between the various factions involved in the boycott marked the organization's first major success. Local leaders in Durham credited WIA's forum and mediation with "helping bring about peaceful resolvment [sic]" of the boycott, according to Kathy McPherson in a *Durham Herald* press release.<sup>83</sup>

The nature of its actions also conformed to one of Women-In-Action's guiding tenets: the refusal to take sides on an issue. In order to perform the mediator function outlined by Elna Spaulding at WIA's outset, the organization needed to maintain a position of "neutrality" in community affairs.<sup>84</sup> In a newsletter distributed to the organization in December 1970, WIA member Amelia Thompson wrote "A Plea for Unity" that expounded on the idea of neutrality and stressed its fundamental role in the work of Women-In-Action. Thompson attributed the community recognition the organization received to this refusal to take sides. But the coalition's commitment to neutrality also remained absolutely critical to its success as a group in the minds of its members. As Thompson asserted, "So important is this that each individual member must remember her value and influence are gone as soon as she takes sides. Not only does she fail to be an asset to Women-In-Action, but she becomes a real hindrance to the work being done."<sup>85</sup>

But one can also argue that this emphasis on neutrality itself operated as a hindrance to Women-In-Action's potential. By adhering to a mediating role and adopting a neutral stance on community problems, the organization avoided having to directly confront racially charged issues. As opposed to the activists of Operation Breakthrough and UOCI, who emphasized the need for demonstrations and other direct action measures, these women could effectively hide

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<sup>82</sup> Mrs. A. T. Spaulding, "An Appeal to the Durham County Board of Commissioners For Financial Support, February 19, 1973," press release. Box 6, Folder 3, WIA papers.

<sup>83</sup> Kathy McPherson, press release for the *Durham Herald*, May 2, 1972. Box 6, Folder 3, WIA papers.

<sup>84</sup> Mrs. A. T. Spaulding, "The Role of Our Organization," n.d. Box 6, Folder 5, WIA papers.

<sup>85</sup> "Newsletter #11," December 9, 1970. Box 6, Folder 2, WIA papers.

behind their commitment to opening up interracial dialogue. As Christina Greene asserted, the cadre of low-income activists “insisted that real power, real material resources, and real lives were at stake, and it rejected the notion that the issues could be resolved simply through clearer communication” across race and class lines.<sup>86</sup> Women-In-Action’s refusal to take a definitive or partisan stance on community issues kept the group within the confines of the politics of respectability and thus limited its effectiveness as an organization.

### **Paving the Way for a Peaceful Transition**

Of the various programs taken up by Women-In-Action, perhaps the most significant and successful was their “Support Durham City Schools” project. This program, first presented to the general membership at a meeting in July 1970, aimed to “help create a climate of acceptance” surrounding the recent desegregation order affecting Durham City and County Schools.<sup>87</sup> This federal order came after years of a “freedom-of-choice” model instituted by the 1955 Pearsall Plan, which operated through a process of voluntary integration that had placed the burden of integration primarily on black parents. Judging this plan as too gradual, a federal court mandated the immediate desegregation of Durham’s city and county school districts for the 1970-71 school year.<sup>88</sup> The new plan also imposed a system of busing to bring about full integration, a necessity that white WIA member Doris McAdams attributed to Durham’s segregated housing patterns. In a surprisingly frank section of the organization’s March 1970 newsletter, McAdams admitted: “That we have failed to integrate our neighborhoods is the chief cause of our school integration dilemma.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 206.

<sup>87</sup> “Newsletter Vol. 8,” July 8, 1970. Box 6, Folder 2, WIA papers.

<sup>88</sup> Anderson, *Durham County*, 363-365.

<sup>89</sup> “Newsletter,” March 2, 1970. Box 6, Folder 2, WIA papers.

In a newsletter issued four months later, the Executive Committee of WIA declared the organization's support for the "complete integration" of both school districts in accordance with the order.<sup>90</sup> Women-In-Action rarely assumed such a definitive stance on the issues they addressed; yet such support for integration stemmed primarily from their desire to facilitate peaceful acceptance of a measure that had already become "the law of the land."<sup>91</sup> Mrs. Abe Greenberg, director of public relations for Women-In-Action, underscored this point. As quoted in *The Durham Sun*, Greenberg stated, "We want the schools to open with a minimum of difficulty. ... We support education for our children, that's all."<sup>92</sup> Still, Women-In-Action's involvement to help ease school integration nevertheless represented its furthest departure from its stated commitment to pure neutrality, and one can argue that this decisive support for integration ensured the success of WIA's work in this area.

To coordinate the schools project, Women-In-Action selected Eula Miller, a former president of the Morehead School P.T.A. and the mother of three school-aged children affected by the impending integration plan. The organization also created five committees to carry out the work of the project, which centered on a variety of tasks: fielding phone calls and inquiries from concerned parents; arranging orientations to acquaint parents, students, and faculty; planning activities to involve youth; and promoting support and "positive attitudes" among the whole community.<sup>93</sup> Harkening back to the traditional values upon which the group was founded, WIA appealed to community members as parents concerned for their children's wellbeing. WIA took advantage of a city-wide PTA meeting held in August 1970 to distribute a document called "Suggestions to Facilitate the Integration Process"; among the thirteen suggestions offered, WIA

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<sup>90</sup> "Newsletter Vol. 8," July 8, 1970. Box 6, Folder 2, WIA papers.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> DeWitt Rogers, "Women's Group Plans School Support Center," newspaper article, *The Durham Sun*, July 25, 1970, Page 3. Box 7, Folder 1, WIA papers.

<sup>93</sup> "Newsletter Vol. 8," July 8, 1970. Box 6, Folder 2, WIA papers.

urged parents to “try to remain calm” for the sake of their children and to “check all ‘rumors’ before you believe them.”<sup>94</sup>

To inform their work, WIA participated in various community panels, forums, and meetings that examined education issues in Durham. These discussions brought together city and county authorities, PTA associations, and private organizations in order to engage all sides of the integration debate and other contentious issues related to education.<sup>95</sup> One such meeting attended by WIA representatives was the Durham City Schools Communications Workshop. Held midway through the 1971-72 school year, the second year of integrated Durham schools, the workshop aimed to identify ways to improve public relations surrounding the recently integrated school system. Its other objectives also aligned well with WIA’s mission; Durham Superintendent Lew W. Hannen wrote that the workshop hoped to “[identify] rumors and misconceptions about the school system which need to be effectively countered.”<sup>96</sup> Just as Women-In-Action had urged Durham parents to “check all rumors” in their 1970 pamphlet of suggestions, so too did they maintain this mission going forward with their largest project to date: the School Support Center.

In anticipation of the opening of the first integrated school year and of the public unrest that accompanied this transition, Women-In-Action established its School Support Center in July 1970. This information center would become the organization’s flagship project and one of its most meaningful contributions to easing racial tensions in the Durham community. Principally, the School Support Center supplied information about the impending arrangements to concerned

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<sup>94</sup> “Suggestions to Facilitate the Integration Process,” n.d. Box 7, Folder 1, WIA papers.

<sup>95</sup> See Box 9, Folder 2, WIA papers.

<sup>96</sup> Letter from Superintendent Lew W. Hannen to Professional Staff Members in the Central Office, 22 December 1971. Box 9, Folder 2, WIA papers.

parents, students, and general citizens of Durham.<sup>97</sup> By providing information to callers such as teacher assignments and bus routes, Women-In-Action hoped to ease the tensions of community members still anxious about the integration and busing plans. As explained by WIA's director of public relations, Mrs. Greenberg, to the *Durham Morning Herald*, "We felt that the most constructive thing we can do is to create a climate of acceptance for the desegregation plan."<sup>98</sup> This mission to promote acceptance of integration among the public remained at the heart of WIA's involvement, as the organization ultimately wanted to ensure that the schools would open peacefully and on time for the 1970-71 school year.<sup>99</sup>

In addition to the School Support Center, Women-In-Action sponsored coffees and teas in their efforts to ease the transition to integrated schools in Durham. These informal gatherings provided a space for parents, teachers, and school principals to meet each other and discuss the details of the desegregation plan.<sup>100</sup> In their aim to "get people acquainted with each other," these coffees and teas paralleled the meetings that WIA had held to acquaint its own members with women of the opposite race.<sup>101</sup> Such gatherings also typified Women-In-Action's brand of activism, which operated primarily through arranging biracial get-togethers of community members and opening channels of communication to reduce racial tensions. By offering parents the chance to talk with fellow parents and their children's principals, WIA hoped to ease their anxieties and thereby preempt a potentially volatile situation.

Women-In-Action continued to provide support for Durham parents even after the integration of schools took effect. In April 1972, the organization sponsored a parents' workshop

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<sup>97</sup> "Some Programs and Projects During the Last Few Years," n.d. Box 4, Folder 3, WIA Papers.

<sup>98</sup> Lee Ridenour, "Birthday Celebration May Be A Bit Late," newspaper article, *Durham Morning Herald*, July 30, 1970, Page 5A. Box 7, Folder 1, WIA papers.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> "Some Programs and Projects During the Last Few Years," n.d. Box 4, Folder 3, WIA papers.

<sup>101</sup> Lee Ridenour, "Women Question New Principal," newspaper article, *Durham Morning Herald*, August 2, 1970, Page 2B. Box 7, Folder 1, WIA papers.

entitled “The 3 R’s--Roles, Relations and Responsibilities.” Held at Rogers-Herr School, this workshop aimed to identify problems in the public schools as perceived by parents and to work toward possible solutions. WIA hoped to achieve a racially- and socioeconomically-mixed group of parent representatives from each of the 44 Durham-area schools at the workshop, as explained in a general letter sent to the schools’ principals and PTA presidents.<sup>102</sup> School personnel and approximately 200 parents attended the workshop, representing 33 of the 44 schools.<sup>103</sup> Based on individual parents’ comment cards as well as a tabulated evaluation generated by WIA, the majority of Durham parents seemed impressed by the workshop and the content of its discussion sessions. The vast majority of attendees expressed a desire for a similar workshop to be conducted on the individual school level.<sup>104</sup> Spaulding then sent a follow-up letter to the principals and PTA presidents expressing her desire to meet with them during the summer of 1972 to plan such workshops.<sup>105</sup>

Praise for WIA’s efforts to facilitate school integration came not just from the parents of school-aged children, but also from many other sectors of the Durham community. The organization’s December 1970 newsletter reprinted a portion of a letter sent to Mrs. Spaulding by the Durham Teachers Association two months earlier. The letter praised WIA’s “energetic dedication” to its schools project and credited the organization in part with “the ‘smoothest opening’ the city schools of Durham have experienced.”<sup>106</sup> Similarly, school officials cited WIA, along with the city’s PTA and other groups, for the “peaceful transition” to integrated schools.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> General letter from Mrs. A. T. Spaulding to Durham Principals and P.T.A. Presidents, March 20, 1972. Box 6, Folder 9, WIA papers.

<sup>103</sup> “Some Programs and Projects During the Last Few Years,” n.d. Box 4, Folder 3, WIA papers.

<sup>104</sup> See “Tabulated Evaluation” and comment cards, n.d. Box 6, Folder 9, WIA papers.

<sup>105</sup> General letter from Mrs. A. T. Spaulding to Durham Principals and P.T.A. Presidents, May 15, 1972. Box 6, Folder 9, WIA papers.

<sup>106</sup> “Newsletter #11,” December 9, 1970. Box 6, Folder 2, WIA papers.

<sup>107</sup> Wayne Hurder, “School Desegregation Smooth in Durham,” newspaper article, *The News and Observer*, September 20, 1970. Box 7, Folder 1, WIA papers.

Coverage in local newspapers mirrored these assessments, with the *Durham Sun* identifying the School Support Center as the organization's most successful project. According to the *Sun*, the State Department of Public Instruction named Women-In-Action a model for similar civic efforts to ease the school integration process in other North Carolina communities.<sup>108</sup>

### **Expanding their Slate of Services**

Second to Women-In-Action's efforts to facilitate peaceful school integration, the Problem Clearinghouse emerged as one of the most successful programs initiated by the organization. Indeed, the creation of this Clearinghouse stemmed directly from the success of the School Support Center; civic officials and Durham citizens alike requested that WIA reactivate this information service to address not just school issues, but also other community problems seen as "potentially tension forming."<sup>109</sup> Consequently, Women-In-Action established its Problem Clearinghouse in October 1970 to serve as a similar information center. The Clearinghouse, situated at 115 East Chapel Hill Street, also became the primary headquarters and meeting place of Women-In-Action as a whole. Under the joint chairmanship of Mrs. Robert Cushman, Mrs. Abe Greenberg, and Mrs. Bessie McLaurin, the Clearinghouse set out to provide "a call-in station to receive rumors, complaints, dissatisfactions, or problems of any type that could cause tension."<sup>110</sup>

In a concrete sense, the Problem Clearinghouse functioned as a much-needed referral service for Durham citizens. WIA members who staffed the Clearinghouse referred callers to the

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<sup>108</sup> "Her Work Merits Brotherhood Award," newspaper article, *The Durham Sun*, September 10, 1970. Box 7, Folder 1, WIA papers.

<sup>109</sup> Letter to Durham citizens from Elna Spaulding, October 1970. Box 7, Folder 5, WIA papers.

<sup>110</sup> "Newsletter #10," November 4, 1970. Box 6, Folder 2, WIA papers.

relevant agencies and organizations that could address their needs or answer their queries.<sup>111</sup> The Clearinghouse fielded calls concerning a variety of issues and services, including education, medical care, consumer affairs, welfare, and housing, among others.<sup>112</sup> According to records for 1972 and the first quarter of 1973, the Clearinghouse served nearly 600 people; calls and visits during this period most commonly concerned employment, financial needs, and child care.<sup>113</sup>

The intended purpose of the Clearinghouse went beyond merely answering questions and referring callers to other agencies, however. The organization also saw its role as “an ombudsman for Durham citizens,” meaning that it intended to investigate the claims of its callers and actively help these callers resolve their problems.<sup>114</sup> Mrs. Edwin B. Hamshar, who succeeded Spaulding as president of WIA, explained this direct assistance procedure in a report submitted to the Women-In-Action Foundation at its annual meeting in 1975.<sup>115</sup> In this request for increased funding from the Foundation, Hamshar insisted that the Clearinghouse filled a clear community need. By nature of its direct assistance procedure, which involved securing emergency and long-term assistance for clients and making calls on their behalf, the Clearinghouse went beyond merely disseminating information.<sup>116</sup>

The social welfare-minded mission of the Clearinghouse mirrored that of Women-In-Action as a whole. In a letter composed to the Durham community in October 1970, Mrs. Spaulding solicited the support and suggestions of citizens at large in “these critical and troubled times,” urging them to get involved in the Clearinghouse project and “‘pull together’ for our

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Eula W. Harris, “Report of Clearinghouse Committee, January 10, 1972.” Box 7, Folder 5, WIA papers.

<sup>113</sup> “Calls and Visits to Clearinghouse, January 1, 1972 to March 1, 1973.” Box 6, Folder 2, WIA papers.

<sup>114</sup> “Women-In-Action for the Prevention of Violence and its Causes, Inc.,” pamphlet, n.d. Box 3, Folder 9, WIA papers.

<sup>115</sup> The Women-In-Action Foundation was incorporated in July 1973 to receive funds for WIA, which at the time did not have tax-exempt status.

<sup>116</sup> Mrs. Edwin B. Hamshar, “Report to the Foundation at its Annual Meeting,” October 13, 1975. Box 4, Folder 3, WIA papers.



shared community welfare.”<sup>117</sup> But Spaulding also recognized the challenges associated with marketing this new type of service to the public. In WIA’s December 1970 newsletter, Spaulding underscored the importance of members individually reaching out to citizens in need of assistance; this “person-to-person contact” remained essential to the efforts of the Clearinghouse to tackle social problems in the community.<sup>118</sup> Along with working to improve general welfare in this way, the Clearinghouse also worked to “[foster] cooperation and good will” among the various organizations, agencies, and other groups offering community assistance programs in Durham.<sup>119</sup>

### **A Particular Brand of Organizing**

As a result of the publicized accomplishments made by Women-In-Action through its various programs, the organization emerged as a model for other communities in North Carolina seeking to establish similar women’s groups. The members of WIA believed that the organization’s framework of biracial women’s work could be implemented elsewhere, and they organized a state workshop in 1971 to share their organizational model.<sup>120</sup> This workshop, held on April 16-17 at the Durham Hotel-Motel, intended to “give support and encouragement” to the North Carolina communities that had recently requested help from WIA in creating similar groups.<sup>121</sup> 241 delegates attended this state workshop from cities across the state.<sup>122</sup>

Elna Spaulding affirmed WIA’s role as a model for women’s organizing: “The Durham experience is vital to any community because we have come together to work on problems and

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<sup>117</sup> Letter to Durham citizens from Elna Spaulding, October 1970. Box 7, Folder 5, WIA papers.

<sup>118</sup> “Newsletter #11,” December 9, 1970. Box 6, Folder 2, WIA papers.

<sup>119</sup> “Some Programs and Projects During the Last Few Years,” n.d. Box 4, Folder 3, WIA papers.

<sup>120</sup> Mrs. Spaulding, “Highlights of 1970 – Report of the President,” January 11, 1971. Box 4, Folder 3, WIA papers.

<sup>121</sup> Mrs. Asa T. Spaulding, “Dear Women of North Carolina,” invitation letter, March 1, 1971. Box 6, Folder 7, WIA papers.

<sup>122</sup> Blue Greenberg, “Statewide Workshop, An observation,” n.d. Box 6, Folder 7, WIA papers.

find solutions... Through adequate funding we can continue to work more efficiently here while helping other communities to organize their womanpower” [original emphasis].<sup>123</sup> Harkening back to the *McCall's* forum that Spaulding attended in 1968, Women-In-Action embraced a style of grassroots womanpower that Spaulding argued could exert “a powerful influence for good in a community.”<sup>124</sup> WIA’s particular brand of womanpower followed a traditional woman’s organizing framework centered on what historian Leslie Brown called “the politics of respectability”—that is, a framework rooted in the traditional values shared by middle- and upper-class women.<sup>125</sup>

Another element of WIA’s brand of “respectability” arose in the paternalistic rhetoric surrounding the organization. The members of Women-In-Action often referred to themselves by their husband’s names in official documents and reports issued to the general public. These women generally used their first names only in internal memos and notes to each other. They seemed to follow the instructions given to them by the *Durham Morning Herald*, which sent WIA guidelines for submitting press releases to the newspaper. “A married woman’s name should always be written as: ‘MRS. JOHN SMITH’, not MRS. MARY SMITH, unless she is widowed or divorced and prefers to use her given name” [original emphasis], the instructions declared.<sup>126</sup> In following these guidelines throughout the course of their records, WIA reinforced notions of traditionalism and paternalism.

A paternalistic character emerged from the very inception of Women-In-Action when, at the organization’s first meeting in September 1968, Elna Spaulding’s husband gave the opening address. In his “kick-off message” to the assembled women, Asa Spaulding instructed that they

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<sup>123</sup> Mrs. Spaulding, “Resume of Proposed Programs,” n.d. Box 7, Folder 5, WIA papers.

<sup>124</sup> “Grant application to the United Fund of Durham, 3-15-72.” Box 5, Folder 3, WIA papers.

<sup>125</sup> Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 338.

<sup>126</sup> “Instructions to Publicity Chairmen – Durham Morning Herald,” n.d. Box 9, Folder 14, WIA papers.

must “deal with [community issues] calmly and intelligently; more rationally than emotionally.”<sup>127</sup> In this way, Spaulding evoked the stereotype of women as primarily emotional beings that must overcome this tendency in order to succeed in their endeavors. The members of WIA were thus called to “discipline [them]selves,” a prerequisite for effective involvement in Durham affairs.<sup>128</sup> Even Women-In-Action’s own “Statement of Purpose and Policy” mirrored the themes of Mr. Spaulding’s message; the document stressed the need to “postpone action on highly emotional and controversial issues to a subsequent meeting when they can be considered calmly and deliberately.”<sup>129</sup>

Women-in-Action’s adherence to conventional gender roles and notions of women’s character thus defined the particular brand of activism under which the organization worked. Despite the advent of the feminist movement at the end of the 1960s, WIA remained on the traditional end of the spectrum of women’s organizing throughout its tenure. United by class-based values of womanhood and social activism, the members of this group successfully established a coalition across racial lines. But the class line proved more difficult to cross, and Women-In-Action largely failed to incorporate lower-class women, black and white alike, into its ranks. In many ways, this class gap prevented the organization from deeply engaging with the social and economic issues that most affected Durham’s lower-income population. Women-In-Action still managed to achieve various successes in reducing racial tensions, particularly through programs like School Support Center and Problem Clearinghouse. In these and other projects, the organization brought the city’s disparate voices into greater dialogue and addressed

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<sup>127</sup> Asa T. Spaulding, “Kick-off Message to the Women-In-Action Coalition for the Reduction of Violence,” pamphlet, September 4, 1968. Box 3, Folder 9, WIA papers.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> “Statement of Purpose and Policy,” n.d. Box 3, Folder 9, WIA papers.

the varying factors that bred racial unrest. Women-In-Action ultimately served as a case study of the complex ways in which race, gender, and class intersected in civil rights era Durham.

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