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The Missus Organization:

Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Contributions to the National Youth Administration

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I have always thought that James Madison had stated a truth which our nation could not afford to forget when he said: "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance and the people who mean to be our governors must arm themselves with the power that knowledge gives."

Eleanor Roosevelt

The National Youth Administration (NYA) helped millions of disadvantaged youths during the Great Depression era. Eleanor Roosevelt, a woman known for her passion for education and America's youth, contributed greatly to the success of the NYA.¹ Eleanor

¹ Note that even though Eleanor's name is attached to this organization, people have widely debated Eleanor Roosevelt's actual role in helping facilitate the NYA. Political activist and author, Joseph Lash, a close friend to Eleanor Roosevelt, names Eleanor as the main contributor to the National Youth Administration. The historian, Alfred Steinberg, agrees with Lash saying that "[Eleanor's] crowning achievement came in 1935 when she persuaded cautious [President Roosevelt] to establish the National Youth Administration." However, John A. Salmond disagrees with both Lash and Steinberg and declares that Aubrey Williams was the main and key contributor to the NYA. Richard A. Rieman also disagrees with the thought that Eleanor Roosevelt was the main contributor, or initiator, to the NYA. See Winifred D. Wandersee, "Eleanor Roosevelt and American Youth," in *Without Precedent: The Life and Career of Eleanor Roosevelt*, ed. John Hoff-Wilson and Marjorie Lightman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 66. Mildred W. Abramowitz, "Eleanor Roosevelt and the National Youth Administration 1935-1943: An Extension of the Presidency," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 14, 4 (1984): 569, accessed February 23, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27550133>. John A. Salmond, "Aubrey Williams: Atypical New Dealer?," in *The New Deal: The National Level*, ed. John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody, (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1975), 222. Richard A. Rieman, *The New Deal & American Youth: Ideas & Ideals in a Depression Decade* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 118.

Roosevelt used her position as the First Lady to make her ideas heard by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and to further her “education for the youth” agenda. The NYA was molded by Eleanor’s ideas on youth, education, and equality. Her relationships with like-minded politicians, such as Aubrey Williams and Mary McLeod Bethune, allowed Eleanor to make sure her ideas were heard and implemented.

Eleanor Roosevelt envisioned a brighter future for the population of America’s youth. Eleanor knew the nation was in shambles and acknowledged that “the world [was] a hard world for youth and that so far [politicians had] not really given [the youth’s] problems as much attention as [was needed.]”² Eleanor feared that if the government could not save the youth, who were “victimized by high unemployment, disrupted family life, and unrelenting poverty,” that the future of democracy was indeed questionable.³ Eleanor knew that this generation was full of future voters; and she made an effort to let the youth know that they were important, that they were needed, and that they were the future of the nation. The First Lady begged her husband, and her colleagues, to keep an open mind to the youth and to try and listen to their wants, needs, and suggestions. In May 1934, a year before Congress created the NYA, Eleanor confessed that she was in constant fear that “the United States was in danger of losing a whole generation of young people.”⁴ Perhaps others believed that Eleanor was foolish for thinking that losing an entire generation was possible; but Eleanor understood that this generation needed to be saved, educated, and trained in practical skills for employment in order to secure these young people’s success in the future.

² Eleanor Roosevelt, “Facing the Problems of Youth,” *Selected Writings of Eleanor Roosevelt* (1935), accessed February 18, 2015, <http://newdeal.feri.org/er/er21.htm>.

³ Maurine H. Beasley, Holly C. Shulman, and Henry R. Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), 213.

⁴ Robert S. McElvaine, *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression, L-Z*, Index ed. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 692.

When Eleanor expressed her concern for losing an entire generation, she was absolutely right to feel concerned. In October 1932, a survey found that “76 out of 77 colleges...confronted ‘the most urgent need in... [their] history for scholarships, loans, deferred tuition payments, and opportunities for earning during term time.’”⁵ Much of the United States’ young people could not afford to go to high school, let alone college. And during the early years of the Depression, a significant number of people, ages ranging from late teens to early twenties, did not have higher than an eighth grade education. Eleanor believed, that due to her powerful position as the First Lady of the United States, she had the means to make a difference in these young people’s lives.⁶

Due to the nature of her concerns and ideas, there is no wonder why she and Aubrey Williams, future Executive Director of the NYA, became friends and allies in the fight for educating youth and preparing them for the future. Aubrey Williams, although from the deep South, did not share other white southerners’ views on race and racial discrimination.⁷ His concern for education and the youth of America developed out of his own personal experiences. As a child, Williams’ family did not have the funds that would allow him to get a full, formal education.⁸ Williams wanted children of the younger generation to have what he could not have, a proper education. He knew that most of these children were coming from families that had been immensely affected by the Great Depression. He knew that something drastic had to be done and that he needed powerful allies to make it happen. During the early month of Aubrey Williams’ job as deputy administrator for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), Williams met, and built a lifelong friendship with, Eleanor Roosevelt.

⁵ Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ Beasley et al., *Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 368.

⁸ Salmond, “Aubrey Williams,” 222.

Eleanor and Williams had many similar ideas, goals, and concerns. They both were interested in eliminating neglect and injustice for the African Americans, the unemployed, and the young generation.⁹ Williams was adamant that the young African Americans of the United States be given the equal opportunity to succeed in education and in employment. And Eleanor, in 1934, spoke out against lynching and school segregation. Because of Eleanor and Williams' commitment to helping African American teens and young adults, Williams appointed Mary McLeod Bethune, a distinguished African American educator, to the important role of Director of the Negro Division of the NYA.¹⁰ Eleanor and Williams consistently "[reinforced] each other's resolves [and pursued] basically the same egalitarian goals."¹¹

Williams turned to Eleanor for advice before making any serious life decisions or serious political decisions.¹² Williams once said "[she is] the greatest person I have ever known."¹³ Eleanor discussed many different ideas regarding the NYA, before it was actually called the NYA, with Williams. They discussed how the NYA would need to develop programs that would give financial aid, monetary grants, and work projects to students already in high school and college; and how the NYA would need to provide aid to the unemployed youth by providing work relief projects and vocational training.¹⁴ Williams had the utmost respect and devotion to Eleanor, which is why he collaborated with her, and asked her to do something incredibly important, bring the idea of the NYA to President Roosevelt.

⁹ Ibid., 236.

¹⁰ McElvaine, *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*, 692; Salmond, "Aubrey Williams," 238.

¹¹ Salmond, "Aubrey Williams," 236.

¹² Ibid., 237.

¹³ Wandersee, "Eleanor Roosevelt and American Youth," 69.

¹⁴ Beasley et al., *Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 367.

With Aubrey Williams and Harry Hopkins, deputy of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Eleanor created the “blueprints” for what would later become the NYA.¹⁵ Because of the fear of political backlash and disapproval from President Roosevelt, Aubrey Williams asked Eleanor if she would mention their idea for this organization to President Roosevelt. In her autobiography, Eleanor writes, “One of the ideas I agreed to present to Franklin was that of setting up a national youth administration. Harry Hopkins, then head of the WPA, and Aubrey Williams, his deputy administrator and later head of the National Youth Administration, knew how deeply troubled I had been from the beginning about the plight of the country’s young people. One day they said: ‘We have come to you about this because we do not feel we should talk to the President about it yet. There may be many people against the establishment of such an agency in the government and there may be bad political repercussions. We do not know that the country will accept it. We do not even like to ask the President, because we do not think he should be put in a position where he has to say officially yes or no now.’”¹⁶ With the acceptance of this request, she had the important role of persuading President Roosevelt to seriously consider this idea and making sure that the public was thoroughly educated on the importance of this youth program.

Eleanor consistently brought up the issues of the youth’s need for education, job training, and employment to President Roosevelt. One night, after agreeing to talk to President Roosevelt, in lieu of Williams and Hopkins, Eleanor went to her husband’s bedroom, as she did every night, to say goodnight. She started off her argument by reminding President Roosevelt that this young generation was a generation of voters and future voters.¹⁷ Based on Eleanor’s private papers, the

¹⁵ Eleanor Roosevelt, *This I Remember* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publisher, 1949), 192; Beasley et al., *Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 367.

¹⁶ Roosevelt, *This I Remember*, 192.

¹⁷ Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin: The Story of Their Relationship, Based on Eleanor Roosevelt’s*

conversation proceeded as such: “He looked at me and asked: ‘Do [Aubrey Williams and Harry Hopkins] think it is right to do this?’” I said they thought it might be a great help to the young people, but they did not want him to forget that it might be unwise politically. They felt that a great many people who were worried by the fact that Germany had regimented its youth might feel we were trying to do the same thing in this country. Then Franklin said: “If it is the right thing to do for the young people, then it should be done. I guess we can stand the criticism, and I doubt if our youth can be regimented in this war or in any other way.”¹⁸ With the seed of the NYA planted in the mind of President Roosevelt, it was only a matter of time before this organization became a reality in the lives of American young people everywhere.

President Roosevelt took nearly a year to complete the executive order that made the NYA a true organization. As a “practical politician,” President Roosevelt weighed the pros and the cons of the NYA.¹⁹ He considered all the minute details that went into creating and running an organization, and knew that legislation took a good amount time. Most of all, President Roosevelt had to deal with, and overcome, the scrutiny of Congress and of conservative organizations. Because the NYA had plans to help the African American youth and the young women of America, President Roosevelt had to pacify the opponents of the “radical” NYA.²⁰ There were many politicians, mostly Republican in ideology, that felt the NYA was too far-reaching and needed to be more conservative before being approved.²¹ The National Education Association was a huge opponent to the NYA. The National Education Association believed that the federal government, by creating the NYA, was intruding into their “domain.”²² Up until the

Private Papers (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971), 540.

¹⁸ Roosevelt, *This I Remember*, 192.

¹⁹ Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 540.

²⁰ Salmond, “Aubrey Williams,” 239.

²¹ Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 542

²² Salmond, “Aubrey Williams,” 229.

closure of the NYA, the National Education Association and its Executive Secretary, Willard E. Givens, often criticized the NYA and claimed that the NYA was inefficient and a duplication of the National Education Association.²³

On June 26, 1935, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the NYA via executive order number 7086.²⁴ As a part, or a subgroup, of the WPA, President Roosevelt ordered that there be a “National Advisory Committee” and an “Executive Committee for the National Youth Administration.”²⁵ Within these committees, President Roosevelt appointed members from many different backgrounds to be representatives. These members were representatives of “labor, business, agriculture, education, and youth.”²⁶

President Roosevelt gave the great honor of being Executive Director of the NYA to Eleanor’s close friends and political ally, Aubrey Williams. Many of the functions of the NYA, which President Roosevelt stated in his executive order, were from Williams and Eleanor’s ideas. The functions of the National Youth Administration, as stated in executive order number 7086, were “to initiate and administer a program of approved projects which shall provide relief, work relief, and employment for persons between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five years who are no longer in regular attendance at a school requiring full time, and who are not regularly engaged in remunerative employment.”²⁷

In order for the NYA to accomplish its numerous functions and duties, President Roosevelt allocated a budget of \$41,200,000 from the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act.²⁸ With this money, the NYA provided opportunities in the form of financial aid, work-study,

²³ Salmond, “Aubrey Williams,” 229.

²⁴ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Executive Order 7086,” in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, ed. Samuel I. Rosenman (New York: Random House, 1938), 282.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 282.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 283.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 283.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 285.

organized recreation, employment, and occupational training.²⁹ As there had never been a program such as this in the history of the United States of America, President Roosevelt knew that taking on this experiment was risky but believed in the leadership of Aubrey Williams and the ideas of Eleanor Roosevelt. President Roosevelt wanted the millions of deprived children to have “the normal blessings of [a] traditional American life” and to “be a part of and to have a share in normal family life [and] in school work...”³⁰ President Roosevelt’s investment in this organization proved to be a successful venture.

One year after signing the executive order that created the NYA, President Roosevelt wrote a letter to Executive Director Williams congratulating him on the successes of the NYA thus far. The NYA was established to give underprivileged and disadvantaged youth, of all races and gender, the opportunity for education and the means to succeed in life. The NYA moved fairly quickly to deal with the problems that these underprivileged and disadvantaged youth were faced.³¹ The NYA maximized its future success by using education to draw attention to the values of vocational training in schools.

The NYA needed a strong and powerful proponent to raise awareness and increase support for the program. Although she never had a formal position within the agency, Eleanor Roosevelt was just the woman to accomplish the mission. She was in the discussion group that laid out the design for the program, and she inspired the very foundation of the program. Eleanor was the face of the NYA. Although she was never an official part of the NYA and isn’t given nearly as much credit as she should have been given, many people saw Eleanor as the mastermind behind the creation of the NYA.

²⁹ Joseph M. Hawes, *Children Between the Wars: American Childhood, 1920-1940* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 118.

³⁰ Roosevelt and Rosenman, *Public Papers*, 328.

³¹ Beasley et al., *Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 367.

Eleanor advocated regularly to President Roosevelt on behalf of the NYA. She conversed with her husband to share her strong opinions on the many different politicians that would help further her agenda and the NYA's agenda, which were nearly one in the same. Eleanor made it a priority to continuously know about the changes, the facts and figures, and the members of the NYA. Eleanor "constantly demanded progress reports from [Aubrey Williams.]"³² Executive Director Williams came to Eleanor for advice of all kinds. Eleanor advised Williams on policy problems and problems he was having with fellow members of the NYA. Eleanor received letters, from all across the country, pertaining to the NYA; these letters ranged from asking for jobs, to giving suggestions, to requesting a visit from her.³³ For example, a young African American girl wrote a letter to Eleanor explaining her desire to "continue [her] education by studying 'theology' at the 'Moody Theological College' in Chicago" and asking "if [Eleanor would] and could please finance [her] expenses for [her]."³⁴ The young girl states, "You don't know what it would mean to me if you would do it for me. You see, I couldn't bring myself to ask just anybody to do this. I had to ask someone who has money and someone who is good and kind to colored people and does not hate them."³⁵

Eleanor traveled to different areas of the United States where the NYA implemented its projects.³⁶ She acted as "an advisor [not only] to the NYA" but also an advisor to Williams.³⁷ Eleanor not only kept close contact with the Executive Director of the National Youth Administration, she also kept close contact with the numerous state leaders in the program's

³² Beasley et al., *Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 367.

³³ Abramowitz, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the National Youth Administration*, 575.

³⁴ W.B., *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: The Letters*, (July 27, 1938), accessed April 22, 2015. <http://newdeal.feri.org/eleanor/wb0738.htm>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Beasley et al., *Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 367.

³⁷ Ibid., 367.

different divisions and the regional directors of the woman's work programs established by the NYA.³⁸

As an in-house advocate for Williams and the NYA, Eleanor often acted as "extension of the presidency" by doing what President Roosevelt could not do because of the political repercussions.³⁹ She often served as his "primary ambassador" to the poor, hardworking, and impoverished people in the hard to reach communities of the United States, such as the Kentucky hills, the Mississippi river valley, and the mountain communities of the East Coast and the Midwest.⁴⁰ She also stood in at political meetings and discussions, as a substitute for the President, when President Roosevelt chose not to participate or was too busy with other presidential matters. Eleanor had ideas that President Roosevelt did not entirely agree with, but both had their own ideas concerning how the NYA should operate.

President Roosevelt was obviously aware of the nation's youths' problems with education costs and lack of availability to education. The government recognized these problems and acknowledged that education needed to cost less to ensure the success of the nation's youth. When the NYA had money problems, Eleanor lobbied relentlessly to President Roosevelt on behalf of the NYA. Her lobbying proved to be essential to the success of the NYA because President Roosevelt did what he could to improve the programs monetary hitches. President Roosevelt once confessed that "sometimes he agreed to an increase in appropriation, or a change in regulation[s], simply to prevent the needs of the [NYA] from [being the only thing talked about during] the dinner conversation."⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid., 213.

³⁹ Abramowitz, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the National Youth Administration*, 569.

⁴⁰ McElvaine, *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*, 833.

⁴¹ Salmond, "Aubrey Williams," pg. 237

Eleanor always made sure that when the Executive Director of the NYA needed to see President Roosevelt, he would be seen by the President as soon as possible. President Roosevelt believed that the government faced “no greater obligation than to justify the faith of its young people...”⁴² Eleanor believed the same to be true, and would hold the government, and the President, accountable to fulfill this obligation.

Eleanor believed that by getting personally involved in the problems of the nation, she could improve the conditions of the people that needed her help most. Eleanor traveled forty thousand miles to examine the economic conditions of the nation.⁴³ Her findings only reinforced what she feared most, the nation’s youth were struggling. Eleanor dedicated four weeks out of the year to travel across the country and give lectures on a variety of topics, including education, women’s rights, African Americans’ rights, youth needs, and employment.⁴⁴

She appeared on the radio, wrote magazine articles, newsletters, and a monthly question-and-answer column in a magazine.⁴⁵ In her “My Day” newspaper articles, Eleanor often included information about NYA developments and projects; she also included information about other New Deal projects that concerned the youth of America.⁴⁶ In one of her “My Day” articles, Eleanor discussed a resident project for a girls’ center for occupational training, and said “I think this NYA center should be one of the best training centers in [New York,] and I am very happy to have had a part in its dedication.”⁴⁷

⁴² Roosevelt and Rosenman, *Public Papers*, 229.

⁴³ McElvaine, *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*, 620.

⁴⁴ James Ciment, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression and the New Deal* (Armonk: Sharpe Reference, 2001), 620.

⁴⁵ McElvaine, *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*, 621.

⁴⁶ Beasley et al., *Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 592

⁴⁷ Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day,” on *My Day by Eleanor Roosevelt*, (July 21, 1941), accessed April 22, 2015. http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1941&_f=md055944.

Eleanor was very gifted at handling the media. She was so gifted that she was able to counterbalance a lot of the criticism, which was incited by her activism and her forward-thinking ideas, by using the media to her advantage. Her media appearances helped promote her “education for the youth” agenda. She profoundly influenced the success of the NYA throughout the years that the NYA was active. Her commitment to the social injustices of the nation led her to be the most politically active First Lady in American history.⁴⁸ Eleanor proved that a First Lady could “command attention and respect in support of high-minded principles such as democracy, justice for all, social betterment, and world peace.”⁴⁹

Of course President Roosevelt was very much concerned with the problem of the unemployed, but Eleanor Roosevelt put the issues of race, youth, and woman’s issues on the political agenda of the NYA, as well as on the minds of many politicians. Eleanor attended many NYA meetings and conferences and weighed in on numerous debates and policy arguments. In a White House press conference, the topic of conversation was the education of youth. Eleanor made this statement: “I should say that [the conversation of] last week’s [NYA] conference brought out the fact that we have to think of the youth in connection with all the adult problems that beset the nation and that those problems, that seem the most vital to youth, come back to the same problems that face everybody... There are certain things that we must try, over the next ten years, to focus on, because they are so important to young people: That is how to obtain better medical care, how to obtain better education, how to obtain better recreation as a part of education...”⁵⁰ This quotation shows just how concerned for the youth of America Eleanor really

⁴⁸ McElvaine, *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*, 621.

⁴⁹ Maurine Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 232.

⁵⁰ Maurine Beasley, ed., *The White House Press Conferences of Eleanor Roosevelt*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983), 145.

was. Not only concerned for their education, but also concerned for their health and overall well-being. Eleanor related to students from all across the United States. She cared enough about the younger generation to make their wants and needs heard at the conferences and meetings of the NYA.

While Eleanor did just about everything she could possibly do for the youth while she was an advocate for the NYA, there are instances when she went above and beyond for the youth, regardless of how it affected her personally and professionally. Eleanor showed kindness to all youth, even those in the controversial antifascist movement of the American Youth Congress, a group of students and young adults that represented the student movement most actively.⁵¹ The American Youth Congress shared Eleanor's views and wrote, in an academic journal, "We consider full academic freedom essential to progress and enlightenment... We refuse to be the lost generation... Education must be available to everyone without discrimination..."⁵² While President Roosevelt was sensitive to opinions from the Right, Eleanor was more concerned about opinions from the Left, where a lot of the younger generation labeled themselves with leftist politics.⁵³ These Left, or "radical," students felt very close to Eleanor because she shared their "desire for an unprecedented federal effort to rescue the Depression's young."⁵⁴

A lot of America's youth believed that Eleanor cared about and was truly invested in their future and that she understood their concerns.⁵⁵ She worked with the NYA and the American Youth Congress to increase the availability of federal financial aid to low-income

⁵¹ Wandersee, "Eleanor Roosevelt and American Youth," 72.

⁵² American Youth Congress, "The Declaration of the Rights of American Youth," *Student Activism in the 1930s* (July 4, 1936): accessed February 18, 2015, <http://newdeal.feri.org/students/ayc.htm>.

⁵³ Ibid., 70–71.

⁵⁴ Cohen, *When the Old Left was Young*, xiv.

⁵⁵ Kriste Lindenmeyer, *The Greatest Generation Grows Up: American Childhood in the 1930's*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005), 243.

students and to the teenagers and young adults who were unemployed and uneducated.⁵⁶

Eleanor's willingness to work with "radical" youth shows her unhindered effort to provide education and employment for the impoverished youth of America regardless of their differences.

Eleanor, today, often receives little credit for all that she did for the younger generation of America. She was never an official member of the administrative sector of the NYA. She could not implement policy nor could she appoint members to the NYA staff. Eleanor took time out of her busy schedule to be a part of this organization, to be the face of the NYA, and to be the "mother of the NYA" to the public.⁵⁷

It seems that during the Great Depression and during the implementation of New Deal projects, Eleanor was most likely to be credited for the creation of the NYA by women, unless it was a male member of the NYA who saw what Eleanor personally did for the NYA.⁵⁸ In 1944, a Washington journalist, Virginia Pasley, noted that Eleanor was "commonly credited in the capital with the creation of the NYA, along with a surplus food program for relief clients, [and] the arts and crafts section of the WPA..."⁵⁹ In 1940, Ruby Black, an Eleanor Roosevelt biographer, stated that "...both Harry Hopkins and Aubrey Williams, without my even asking, told me emphatically that Mrs. Roosevelt was responsible for the creation of the NYA."⁶⁰ In reference to Eleanor using her position as the First Lady of the United States to forward her ideas for the NYA, May Craig, in 1938 at Val-Kill, stated her ideas of Eleanor's helpfulness to the

⁵⁶ Beasley et al., *Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 591.

⁵⁷ Reiman, *The New Deal & American Youth*, 183.

⁵⁸ In almost all of the sources I compiled, I noticed a trend of mostly female figures endorsing Eleanor Roosevelt for the creation of the National Youth Administration. Other than the female endorsement, the other form of endorsement came from men who worked for or in the National Youth Administration and from men who worked relatively closely with Eleanor Roosevelt for many years.

⁵⁹ Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady*, 233.

⁶⁰ Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 541.

NYA: “[Eleanor] was really an advocate: she wants the [National] Youth Administration to get funds and move forward. So she would say “Well you see Franklin” every now and then when she felt she could put in a helpful sidelight. She has been around to practically every state, seeing the [National Youth Administration] activities, so she could really steer the conference. The President hasn’t been married to her for so long without knowing her methods...He knew she was trying to show him this Youth program because it is close to her heart...”⁶¹

Yet, in today’s society, President Roosevelt gets most of the credit for providing for the youth of America and giving them a “new deal” to better their lives. He did do an incredible job digging America out of the Great Depression and implementing an “out-of-school” work program within the NYA.⁶² President Roosevelt does give Eleanor some of the credit for creating the NYA by acknowledging her role in the NYA by referring to the NYA as “the missus organization.”⁶³

The NYA truly did not have a more powerful advocate or a better friend than Eleanor Roosevelt.⁶⁴ Her name has been closely related to the NYA since the inception of the program. Not only was Eleanor responsible for many of the NYA’s major ideas, such as the NYA helping all genders and races, she also was responsible for holding the first ever White House Conference on Rural Education.⁶⁵ She opened up the opportunity for children who live in rural communities to gain an education just like their city counterparts. Eleanor wanted to make

⁶¹ Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 551.

⁶² Roosevelt and Rosenman, *Public Papers*, 158.

⁶³ Beasley et al., *Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 591.

⁶⁴ Beasley et al., *Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 368.

⁶⁵ Eleanor Roosevelt, “This I Believe About Public Schools,” (March 1950): accessed February 18, 2015, <http://newdeal.feri.org/er/er22.htm>.

education a commodity that was convenient enough to be had and used by all young Americans.⁶⁶

Because the NYA used Eleanor's ideas to make education a more realistic dream in any city or suburb, regardless of gender or race, an enormous amount of young Americans achieved this dream. Eleanor served as a vital link between President Roosevelt and the NYA and the student movement, and this is why the NYA is considered a success.⁶⁷ The NYA proved to be one of the most successful organizations of the New Deal. The NYA, with Eleanor's constant presence, helped educate and employ more than five million young Americans before it was extinguished in 1943.⁶⁸ The NYA helped prevent the government from losing a generation that was feared lost.

The NYA has many statistics to help prove its success throughout the years. In the NYA's first academic year, 1935 to 1936, the NYA's student jobs "enabled 275,544 school students to earn six dollars a month, 125,758 college students to earn twenty dollars a month, and 6,707 graduate students to earn forty dollars a month."⁶⁹ From 1935 to 1943, the NYA assisted over 2,134,000 young boys and girls by giving them financial assistance.⁷⁰ The NYA assisted young children not only in the continental United States, but also Hawaii, Alaska, and Puerto

⁶⁶ Eleanor Roosevelt, "The Power of Knowledge," (March 1934): accessed February 18, 2015, <http://newdeal.feri.org/er/er20.htm>.

⁶⁷ Cohen, *When the Old Left was Young*, 193.

⁶⁸ Beasley et al., *Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 368; Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady*, 154. The National Youth Administration was ultimately terminated due to congressional quarrels between the different parties. Also in 1943, there were more jobs than available workers; this was due to the military's need of male soldiers in World War II.

⁶⁹ Aubrey Williams, "The Government's Responsibility for Youth," *The Prospect for Youth* (1937): 122, accessed February 23, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1022149>.

⁷⁰ Roosevelt and Rosenman, *Public Papers*, 157.

Rico.⁷¹ In 1938, in the continental United States, Hawaii, Alaska, and Puerto Rico, a total of 440,866 students were given NYA work-study projects to help pay for school.⁷²

At its peak, the academic year of 1939 to 1940, the NYA helped close to 750,000 young Americans “in 1,700 colleges and universities and over 28,000 secondary schools.”⁷³ All of these 750,000 individuals received benefits from the NYA in forms of financial aid, student jobs, and vocational training.⁷⁴ Regardless of the statistics, one has to take into account just how huge of a role Eleanor played in the NYA’s creation, in its achievements, and in its forward-thinking ideas.

The NYA was an organization of moral integrity, equality and social justice. Eleanor wanted the NYA to be free from discrimination; and because of her close friendship with Williams, he and Eleanor were able to implement some forms of equality within the administration of the NYA.⁷⁵ More African Americans were employed in the NYA in administrative positions, or positions of influence, than any other New Deal program.⁷⁶ Not only were more African Americans employed in the NYA, the NYA had the best record in racial justice out of all the New Deal programs.⁷⁷ According to the *Chicago Sunday Bee*: “No Federal agencies have been fairer to colored Americans than the NYA; none as tolerant. It is the NYA that has distinguished itself by placing Negroes in policy-making positions. The ideas and thoughts of Negroes were sought and used in building the NYA program from the bottom up...

⁷¹ Aubrey Williams, “The College and High School Aid Program of the Youth Administration,” *The Works Program* (September 24, 1937): accessed February 18, 2015, <http://newdeal.feri.org/works/aw01.htm>.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 157.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 157.

⁷⁵ Salmond, “Aubrey Williams,” 238.

⁷⁶ Raymond Wolters, “The New Deal and the Negro,” in *The New Deal: The National Level*, ed. by John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody, (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1975), 193.

⁷⁷ Salmond, “Aubrey Williams,” 239.

The NYA is ahead of all the Federal agencies in working toward the full integration of colored people...”⁷⁸

The NYA was ultimately well received by students and teachers alike, thanks to Eleanor’s continuous promotion. Many school teachers were thankful for the NYA. They were thankful because the NYA saved a countless number of teachers’ jobs at all levels of education.⁷⁹ One teacher, Sarah Elizabeth Bundy, says “...if some of us who have professional association [or careers] with the plan are learning lessons and gaining new ideas which will carry over into permanent channels, then surely the NYA can be counted a success.”⁸⁰ Many of the projects that the teachers, as well as the students, had to complete for the NYA, were considered very worthwhile and not just “busy work.”⁸¹ These worthwhile tasks helped the educators teach their students and helped the students learn and prosper in school.

The great success in the schools all started with an increase in enrollment. In 1932, the United States colleges saw a decrease in enrollments by four percent.⁸² In colleges that charged tuition fees, the enrollment at this time was continuing to drop.⁸³ This drop in enrollments was “the first peacetime year in the twentieth century when college enrollments fell.”⁸⁴ College enrollments fell because many students in secondary schools were unable to finish due to lack of funds because of the Great Depression. When the NYA was initiated in 1935, enrollments soared higher than they had ever been before in public elementary schools and public secondary schools.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 239.

⁷⁹ Hawes, *Children Between the Wars*, 118.

⁸⁰ Sarah Elizabeth Bundy, “A Side-Light on the N.Y.A.,” *The Survey*, (August 1937): accessed February 18, 2015, <http://newdeal.feri.org/survey/s378.htm>.

⁸¹ Ibid., <http://newdeal.feri.org/survey/s378.htm>.

⁸² Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 16.

⁸³ Roosevelt, *Public Papers and Addresses of FDR*, ed. Roseman, 284.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 15.

As the students prospered in education, many went on to complete their schooling. From 1935 to 1943, more than two million young Americans completed their schooling while on NYA assistance.⁸⁵ Because of the NYA, these underprivileged young children and young adults were able to complete their education during a time of great depression where this task seemed almost impossible without assistance. Eleanor said, “[The NYA] was one of the occasions on which I was proud that the right thing was done, regardless of political considerations...it turned out to be politically popular and strengthened the administration.”⁸⁶ It is truly an incredible accomplishment and is a great example the success that Eleanor dreamed of.

Eleanor’s NYA succumbed to wartime budget cuts, much like the CCC did.⁸⁷ In 1943, Congress abolished the NYA, along with numerous other New Deal programs, such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), Federal Arts Project (FAP), and the Federal Theater Project (FTP).⁸⁸ While the NYA was not intended to be a long-lasting, or permanent, program, President Roosevelt and Eleanor objected persistently to this programs abolition.⁸⁹ Even though the NYA was eliminated, its run helped millions of young Americans and made Eleanor a household name for the promotion of education everywhere.

Eleanor Roosevelt was a role model to millions of young girls and millions of young students. She went from being an unobtrusive wife of a powerful President Roosevelt to being a political figure of her own. Eleanor was not just a First Lady who stuck to her role of appearing to be the perfect housewife. She morphed into the face of an extremely successful organization

⁸⁵ McElvaine, *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*, 692.

⁸⁶ Roosevelt, *This I Remember*, 193; Abramowitz, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the National Youth Administration*, 579.

⁸⁷ Lindenmeyer, *The Greatest Generation Grows Up*, 223.

⁸⁸ World History Online, "New Deal Programs," *History Articles* (2011): Accessed April 8, 2015; The FWP, FAP, and FTP were all grouped together under the title Federal Project Number One. Federal Project Number One was administered under the WPA.

⁸⁹ McElvaine, *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*, 692; Lindenmeyer, *The Greatest Generation Grows Up*, 219.

and into the most powerful and influential women in the United States of America.⁹⁰ Eleanor set a standard for the future First Ladies; a standard to make a change, to be a political influence, and to reach out the country their husbands were head of.

Eleanor lobbied relentlessly for the NYA and promoted it constantly. Eleanor personally travelled across the United States, reaching populated cities and sparsely populated rural communities. She influenced young boys and young girls and broke down racial barriers. She dedicated her life to making other peoples' lives better. She envisioned "a younger generation rescued from poverty, and [a younger generation with] a renewed energy and sense of idealism."⁹¹

Eleanor was essential to the success of the NYA. She made the dream of getting a proper education attainable for underprivileged youth across America. Williams, Executive Director of the NYA, wrote in the *Final Report of the National Youth Administration Fiscal Years: 1936-1943*: "One of the NYA's ablest and wisest friends was Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of the President of the United States. Her unfailing interest, her deep and sympathetic understanding of the problems of the youth, and her endless courage were a source of great strength and guidance to the NYA, to the youth on its program, and to the youth of American. I speak of her with a grateful heart that [the] youth have had and will continue to have such a friend."⁹² The NYA is considered a success because of Eleanor's passion for bettering the youth of America, for making education available to all, and for putting the social injustices of gender discrimination and racial discrimination on the minds of politicians in the capital. Eleanor was the main contributor to the very idea of the NYA.

⁹⁰ Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady*, 232.

⁹¹ Cohen, *When the Old Left was Young*, 193.

⁹² Abramowitz, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the National Youth Administration*, 578; I found this quote within another source, but it is obtainable in the actual documented Final Financial Fiscal Report of the NYA.

About the author

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