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ASKED & ANSWERED

YWCA of New York chief executive on empowering young women and girls

Danielle Moss Lee heads up the nation's first YWCA that serves 2,500 families in the five boroughs

Catherine Fredman



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For the past several years, Danielle Moss Lee has worked to expand the YWCA's social justice advocacy for women and girls.

City area.

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The YWCA of the City of New York was the nation's first YWCA and now serves 2,500 families in the five boroughs. Since joining the organization in 2012, President and CEO Danielle Moss Lee has promoted and expanded its social justice advocacy for women and girls. Recently, she co-chaired the New York City Council's Young Women's Initiative, an effort to remove the systemic barriers to achievement that disproportionately affect young women of color.

How is the YWCA of New York City distinct from the national YWCA?

All YWCAs have the same mission: eliminating racism and empowering women. We are wholly focused on developing women and girls from all walks of life here in the New York

How do you interpret the mission within the context of New York City?

We believe the work we do to develop teen girls and young women ages 21 to 35, and the child care programs we offer that make it possible for working families to know their kids are safe, are vital.

In what ways would you like to see the YWCA evolve?

Historically, the YWCA has been an all-encompassing organization for women. The piece that's been missing has been extending that reach to girls.

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WHO SHE IS President and chief executive officer, YWCA of the City of New York

SALARY \$200,000 plus a \$30,000 discretionary bonus

AGE 47

BORN Upper West Side

RESIDES Upper West Side

EDUCATION Swarthmore College, B.A. in English literature and history; Teachers College, Columbia University, M.A., Ed.M. and Ph.D.

RÉSUMÉ Moss Lee was a teacher in the Bronx and Brooklyn and for 10 years was the president and CEO of the Harlem Educational Activities Fund. This year, Mayor Bill de Blasio appointed her to the city's newly established Commission on Gender Equity.

WHICH Y Growing up, Moss Lee attended "the other Y—the YMCA on West 63rd Street." She went to McBurney High School, which was run by the YMCA of Greater New York.

GENDER STUDIES "People kidded me about taking on this role at an organization where the board is all women—'oh, it's going to be catty' and all the stereotypes about women. It was so nice to see women thinking intentionally and thoughtfully. There have been a lot of women who supported me along my journey without an agenda or quid pro quo, and it is important to emphasize that."

What makes the "W" in the YWCA relevant today?

There's been a narrative that "the girls are OK" that the data doesn't support. The Young Men's Initiative and My Brother's Keeper are necessary, but the idea that girls of color don't also need support—whether in school, health care, the criminal justice system or the foster care system—is just not accurate.

New York has a reputation for highly segregated schools. Does the YWCA bring girls together?

The signature event among our girls initiatives is our annual Potential to Power Girls Symposium, which this year will bring together 250 girls from public, private and parochial schools. What comes out of those conversations is all the things girls have in common—all the issues they struggle with, the aspirations they share—and being able to celebrate each other in a free and nurturing environment. It's a transformational experience for many of the girls, and not just the ones from poor backgrounds. After all, if everyone you know lives on Park Avenue, that's an isolating experience, too.

What are some of the other programs you have launched?

I'm proud of our YW Amplifying Multiple Perspectives Leadership Program for teenage girls. We also offer free programs for high school girls interested in science, technology, engineering, art, activism and math. Our 2015 YW Geek Girls Hacker Team was the only team of high school competitors to make the final round of the New York City BigApps Competition.

A lot of people were dismayed when the YWCA sold its historic midtown headquarters in 2005 for \$31.5 million. Was there fallout?

The board and executive staff at that time really struggled with how the sale would impact the community's perception of the organization, but they saw it as an opportunity to take the mission out into communities. After all, the needs of those who live in the vicinity of 52nd Street and Lexington Avenue now are different from those who lived there in the early 1900s, when that building was built. The neighborhoods we now operate in—East New York, Brownsville, Coney Island, Clinton—have pockets of real poverty that need our attention and support.

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