

TELLING THE STORIES OF ENTERPRISING WOMEN



BY DR. AMY ROSENKRANS '93, D'16

My time as a student at Notre Dame was life-changing, and it molded me into the teacher and historian that I am today. In spring 2023, I had the privilege of serving as the lead researcher on a project with three incredible young women from the University's Elizabeth Morrissy Honors Program where we documented the stories of the Woman's Industrial Exchange in Baltimore.

As secretary for the Maryland Women's Heritage Center's executive board, I was thrilled when the center moved into its current home, the former location of the Baltimore Woman's Industrial Exchange. The Woman's Industrial Exchange closed in 2002 leaving behind all sorts of fascinating artifacts.

As a historian, I was intrigued by the history behind all of the artifacts and immediately began thinking about how we could use the artifacts to tell the story of both the building and the Exchange.

Setting the Record Straight

We soon learned that there was no comprehensive history of the Woman's Industrial Exchange. As I explored the building, I found some interesting artifacts that I felt could be used to fill in the gaps of the history of the Exchange. After speaking to other members of the Maryland Women's Heritage Center executive board, we launched the "Memories of the Baltimore Woman's Industrial Exchange" project. As an organization, we applied for and received a two-year grant from the Baltimore National

Heritage Area. With the help of the grant, we are working to create as comprehensive a history of the institution as possible – by going through the artifacts in the room, by doing archival research, and by conducting oral histories of people still alive who have been associated with the Exchange.

Since the Maryland Women's Heritage Center is made up of volunteers, except for one part-time executive director, I knew I could not do this project on my own. I immediately thought of my longtime connections to Notre Dame. I was a Morrissy Scholar and first graduated with a history and political science double major and a pre-law minor. I later earned my Ph.D. in the education program. As a history person - I wrote a history dissertation. Dr. Evelyn Spratt, the director of Notre Dame's Morrissy Honors Program, was my dissertation chair.

I love this kind of intergenerational cooperation that has been made possible because of the Morrissy Program.

Dr. Spratt keeps me up to date on what is happening with the Morrissy Program, and I participated in the oral history project for the program's 40th anniversary in 2022. Because of my involvement with that project, I began thinking about doing something similar with the Woman's Industrial Exchange research. Then it hit me- maybe Morrissy Scholars could assist me with that research!

I immediately contacted Dr. Spratt to discuss the feasibility of Morrissy Scholars participating. Was there a way that they could receive credit for their involvement? We brainstormed a little bit, and with the help of several people at the University, we were able to offer an independent study for three students. This was super exciting!

Students Uncovering Women's History

Three incredible Morrissy students – Jensen Armstrong '24, Eliza Davis '25, and Anna Choudhary '25 – were chosen to participate in the project. We have researched the women and men associated with the Woman's Industrial Exchange, which was a charity run entirely by high-society women in Baltimore City. We



started with creating biographies of the women involved. Many if not most of the women were from very prominent Baltimore families, notably the Hopkins, Latrobe, Gilman, and Abell families.

The interns scoured newspaper archives and the materials that we found in the room in the Exchange building. Most of the documents that we found are written in beautiful script, but are not exactly easy to read, so they transcribed them to help document the history. We have also conducted oral histories with people that still remember either shopping or working or eating at the Woman's Industrial Exchange.

It was a fabulous opportunity for these young women to be self-directed in a very loosely defined internship. In my first meeting with them, I introduced them to the Woman's Industrial Exchange. I told them what the parameters of my project are, and I said, "What can we do? This is where I would like you to help." And they took the ball and rolled with it.

They are all out-of-the-box thinkers and self-motivated. They were excited about the topic, and every time I met with them, there was always something new they had learned and were excited to share.

I absolutely love that they are confident young women and are able to communicate with all types of people in all types of situations. The intergenerational cooperation that has been made possible because of the Morrissy Program is invaluable.

Sharing Hidden Stories with the World

Since the beginning of this project, I have been blown away by how far we have come. We held our first open house in March 2023 to encourage anyone with memories of their interactions with the Woman's Industrial Exchange to share their reflections. That event got the attention of a reporter from the Baltimore Banner, who interviewed us for a story in the online newspaper. The students have also created a research presentation based on

their work, which they took to several conferences and to Notre Dame's Community Day. I have also facilitated presentations locally, including at Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library.

In the end, the Maryland Women's Heritage Center is creating a website for the Woman's Industrial Exchange. Anna and Eliza will be the chief designers of the website, and the research that the interns completed will be the basis for the website.

My experience working with interns from the Morrissy Program was fantastic, and I look forward to additional ways to expand the partnership between Notre Dame and the Maryland Women's Heritage Center to benefit students.

Dr. Amy Rosenkrans '93, D'16 is a proud double graduate of Notre Dame of Maryland University. In 2017, she received the Joseph L. Arnold Prize for Outstanding Writing on Baltimore History by the Baltimore City Historical Society. She served as a consultant to the Hard Histories Project at Johns Hopkins University, where she worked with undergraduates researching African American orphans housed in the Johns Hopkins Colored Orphan Asylum. She currently shares her passion for history with middle school students in Baltimore City. She credits Notre Dame with fostering her love for history and teaching her the skills to develop that love in others. She is the 2023 recipient of Notre Dame's Service to Society Award.