

# Living

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In the 1950s, the Anna Louise Inn housed many "career girls," such as Jewell Poore, Donna Baker and Toby Bingham (1959 photo). At far left, long-ago residents of the dormitory at curfew time.

# The Anna Louise turns 90

## Downtown inn helps women start over

By Camilla Warrick  
Post staff reporter

**N**o men, no alcohol, no pets. And no profanity. If you're a woman who can live by these rules, the Anna Louise Inn has a place for you for a week or a lifetime. The bedrooms aren't big. The bathrooms are down the hall. The dining room is only serving dinner these days, not the fried eggs and fresh grits that made Naomi King salivate at the word "breakfast."

"But this is home," said Ms. King, a retiree. "I don't want to go anywhere else." Marty Kiser, a critical care nurse and three-year resident, agrees: "I wouldn't move, even if I were a millionaire."

This year, the Anna Louise Inn celebrates its 90th birthday. The search is on for former residents and for photographs and stories linked to one of the few women's boarding houses in the country.

Some stories, inevitably, reveal tragedies: women who slipped back into a drug habit or a depression which led to suicide. But many more stories contain triumphs of women anchored, protected and enriched by their stint at the Inn.

"Lives change, people change, needs change, but this agency has moved along with the needs of women," said Sister Kevin Schingel, director of residential services.

At 300 Lytle St., the Inn occupies some of the most prized real estate in Cincinnati, just north of the Ohio River and just east of the financial palaces of Fourth and Fifth streets. But the Inn's fees could undercut a mom-and-pop motel stuck in a briar patch.

The base rate of \$48 a week, which includes three dinners, makes it four times cheaper than a

one-bedroom apartment at its skyscraper neighbor, One Lytle Place. But the Inn is in a category of its own, competing neither with apartment buildings nor hotels.

Ms. King, 75, is proud to tell her story, how she arrived during a midlife divorce, working two jobs and needing both security and privacy. That was 26 years ago. She didn't expect to find a community of women — "girls," as she calls them — who would become as precious as having a room of her own.

But this year, when she underwent surgery for colon cancer, she never felt alone. Back at the Inn, during a gradual recovery, "the girls left me canned food at the front desk and they're donating their meal tickets. I have enough to last me through the year," she said.

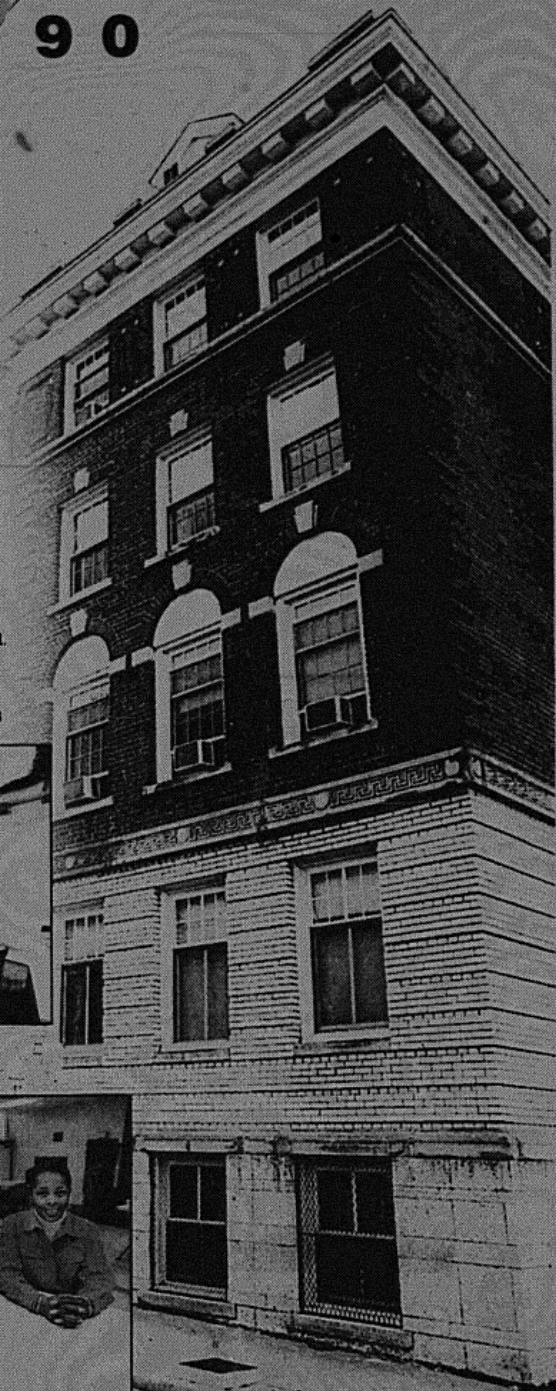
Natasha Roland won't forget the day someone slipped a twenty dollar bill under her door. She'd come to the Inn after her advertising company closed. She could afford neither an apartment nor a car.

"I was angry and humiliated," she said. She needed a little time and patience and someone who believed in her. The anonymous \$20 assured her that someone did.

Now, just 16 months later, with the support of 40 advertisers, she's publishing her own "charity magazine" (called "It's Your Time Now") and could move out, into an apartment. "But this is home now," she said. "There's no way I'm moving."

Cincinnati was a different city when the Inn opened its doors in the spring of 1909.

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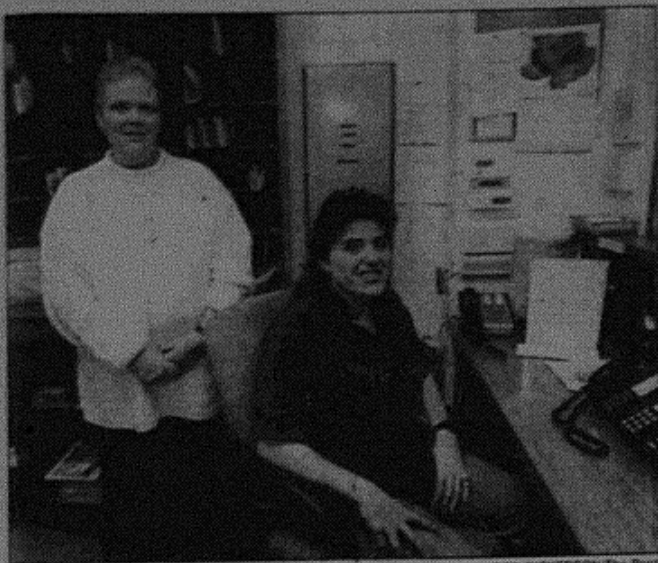


The Anna Louise Inn's management, from left: the Rev. Dr. Cynthia Hampton, Susan Kinsella, Gretchen Wilson, Olivia Farr and Sister Kevin Schingel.



The Anna Louise Inn has occupied its downtown site near Lytle Park since 1909. At right, current residents Naomi King, Joann Anderson and Natasha Roland in the dining room.





BOB DICKERSON/The Post

Two of the people who keep the Anna Louise Inn running are bookkeeper Carol Zurweller, left, and Linda Nadel, switchboard operator and resident.

## Inn

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The five-story, Neo-Georgian dormitory was built on the east edge of Lytle Park, across from the Taft Museum and a short walk from the factories of the Basin.

These workplaces were the destination of young women from dozens of small towns in Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana. But the women flocked to a city with no decent places for them to sleep and no option for meals but corner saloons.

In 1907, the Rev. James Orm White, superintendent of the city's oldest social service agency, Cincinnati Union Bethel, turned the problem into a crusade. He was supported by dozens of donors, in particular Mr. and Mrs. Charles Taft, whose gifts prompted the naming of the Inn in honor of their daughter, Anna Louise Taft Semple.

In addition to rules about men and alcohol, the young residents had to meet an income requirement. They could not be earning more than \$12.50 a week. Otherwise, the Inn might lose its mission to be "a working girls home," as Mrs. Taft put it.

Rates varied from \$2.20 to \$4.50 a week. That sum covered room and board — meals, served on starched, white linens, laundry done by the help and a built-in social life. In no time at all the Inn's 275 rooms were filled and a waiting list formed.

About 50 years later when Martha Taylor graduated from high school, left her home in Augusta, Ky., and came to the Inn, the original goal was still being met. "It was just a very nice place where a lot of single girls lived," said Mrs. Taylor, now of Northern Kentucky.

She was one of them. She worked as a secretary downtown and would commute home with friends on weekends. She remembered that the home-cooked meals were excellent, the rules tolerable and the friendships enduring. One of the men she met on a blind date became her husband, Bill.

Mrs. Taylor returned to the Inn five years ago as a volunteer, doing clerical work. She knows the occupancy rate should be higher and the operating subsidy from Cincinnati Union Bethel lower. "But I think it's worth saving," she said. "I really hope it will continue."

So does interim director Gretchen Wilson and development director Olivia Farr. Both have worked for the Inn (or Cincinnati Union Bethel) for seven years, trying to increase occupancy, improve the premises and decrease the operating deficit.

But utilities consume \$50,000 — even without central air conditioning — and rents bring in only 70 percent of costs. A bingo operation which generated \$60,000 has just been discontinued.

"We have to recover that income," said Ms. Farr. "The board is strongly supportive of the Anna Louise Inn. But will it always be here? I don't know."

She and Ms. Wilson are brainstorming about ways to get the word out. They'd like to target high school girls or suburban moms who need a short respite. "The sad thing," said Ms. Wilson, "is how many women don't even know we're here."

Wilma Wood was the "first, youngest resident" when she came to the Inn in 1954. She was 16 and determined to finish Central High School, which required work terms sandwiched around study terms. Wilma's father didn't approve of the arrangement and told her to drop out.

"But I wanted to graduate," Ms. Woods said, "and I had to leave home to do it."

Her stay at the Inn was less than half a year, but it left a lasting impression. "It was absolutely gorgeous then," she said, "nothing like it is today."

Five years ago she felt moved by God to return to the Inn, this time as a volunteer, not a resident. She and a group of people from her church go in once a month with a meal and an evening's presentation.

"I wouldn't give this up for nothing in the world," she said. "I love this work."