Janet Klauber and Joyce Majure entered Yale as incoming freshmen in the fall of 1969, two members of the first female undergraduate group admitted to the college. Encouraged by her father, Joyce had applied to Yale, along with several other of her male high school classmates; she was the only member of her class, however, to gain admission. Janet had grown up in San Diego and learned to row at ZLAC, the oldest women’s rowing club in the U.S., founded in 1892.

In the autumn of 1971, their junior year, inspired by Janet’s prior experience at ZLAC and Joyce’s boyfriend, who was in charge of intramural rowing at Yale, the young women teamed up to compile an all-women’s intramural eight to represent the combined residential college team for two of Yale’s twelve residential colleges, Morse and Stiles. Nancy Zerbey and Amoret Cardeiro, both members of the class of ’73, were in that first crew, along with Joyce and Janet, the first all-women’s crew that competed at or for Yale. Although the team did not beat any of their intramural competitors, they came close, reportedly within 12 inches in one race.

That spring, the team traveled to race in the first championship regatta held by the newly formed New England Association of Women’s Rowing Colleges, a group of 20 crews from clubs, high schools, and colleges. The regatta was held on Rogers Lake in Old Lyme, CT, for eights only, over a one thousand meter course. Princeton won that first championship, which would become the Eastern Sprints two years later, when the college programs, having quickly progressed to over-powering dominance over the high school programs, demanded a restructuring of the regatta. However, the first group of Yale women rowers did not successfully hold their own against their collegiate and high school competitors in their 1972 outing.

As is now typical of Yale women rowers, Janet viewed the crew’s dismal performance as an indicator that the crew needed not to give up, but to get serious. That meant a coach and equipment, a captain and regular practices. The women’s rowing program launched as a club sport at the start of the next academic year, with Joel “Joe” Ristuccia, a heavyweight rower whose girlfriend was a Morse College resident, recruited to coach.
Tony Johnson, the heavyweight men’s varsity coach, helped pave the way, offering Joe a budget of $600 to fund the program. Joe took the money and bought a set of oars, even though the women lacked their own shell. Wyn Kelley, ’73 served as the program’s first captain. Both Joe and Wyn proved fabulous leaders: always upbeat, smiling, great team spirit, with spot-on instincts for creating a sense of team, despite the plethora of ‘occasional’ rowers.

The team started rowing in the fall of 1972 in a borrowed shell at the Lagoon. They scrimmaged unsuccessfully against men’s intramural teams, and entered the Head of the Charles Regatta, which at that point offered only two women’s events, the elite single (with 7 entries) and the eight. The Yale women’s eight, stroked by Janet, yet slowed by the seven seat’s seat malfunction, which caused her to row the race on the runners instead of the seat (ouch!), finished 12th out of 12 in a time of 23:24.5, a full five minutes slower than the winner, Vesper Boat Club. (Wisconsin was second, MIT, third, and Radcliffe fourth).

Although Joyce did not compete beyond the fall, a solid cadre of women joined Janet and Wyn, including the program’s first coxswain, Timi Handelman, Jean Hopkins, Pam Kohlberg, Jane Beach, Sayre Weaver, Chris Bird, Mollie McKnickle, Ariane Van Buren, Robin Mower, and Betsy Sullivan. By the following spring, the team began rowing at Derby, in borrowed shells built for the men, too big and too heavy. As is often the case, a mom came to the rescue, in this case, Joe Ristuccia’s, Elinor, who donated the first women’s eight, a used men’s rowing shell that was deemed too light for the guys. The boat was christened the Ristuccia, in Elinor’s honor, a fitting tribute for the program’s first major financial supporter. Elinor not only set the women on the path to success, she also established the women’s crew tradition of women supporting the program with generous financial contributions. With much to celebrate, Joe inaugurated the program’s first awards banquet, and every rower received a pewter mug.

Upon Joe’s admittance to graduate school in Boston, Nat Case, ’70, stepped up to coach the team. He brought two years of coaching
experience, at Howard University, and as an unrequited Olympics aspirant who’d trained for the Munich Games, knew what the sport required of its most elite athletes. No one realized at the time that he would set a standard for excellence based on a grueling work ethic, foster an attitude in his rowers that was the antithesis of cocky, and establish the YWC at the top of the pyramid of collegiate programs.

In the fall of ’73, behind the leadership of captain, Betsy Sullivan, the squad grew, joined by Amy Richlin, a graduate student who’d learned to row at Princeton, Page Knudsen, Lucy Leong, Anne Lovett, Chris Ernst, Anne Warner, Ann Graham, another graduate student, and Ann Simko. The team entered the Head of the Charles again, which had grown to 17 events, with still only two dedicated to women. This time, ten scullers raced in the elite women’s singles event and Yale’s eight came in 9th out of 28, with a time of 19:43.8, losing to first place Radcliffe by a mere 1:08.2.

Over the winter, a new face appeared on the scene, Syd Shera, and the following spring, her name found its way into the varsity eight was comprised by: Timi at cox, Page stroking, Anne Lovett at 7, Anne Warner at 6, Amy Richlin at 5, Ann Graham at 4, Chris Ernst at 3, Syd at 2 and Betsy Sullivan at bow. The squad won the Mid-Atlantic and NE regionals and raced in the first EAWRC Sprints, held on Lake Besek in Middlefield, CT, coming in second, with the only on-water disappointment stemming from consistent losses to Radcliffe.

The women not only distinguished themselves with their rapid progress and strong performances, but they far surpassed the men’s performance. At the end of the season, the crew earned retroactive recognition as a varsity program. Less than three years after Joyce and Janet had launched the first Yale women on the water, the program had established itself as a contender, worthy of respect and deserving of resources. Timi Handelman became the third captain of the Yale Women’s Crew for the varsity’s official ‘first’ season in the fall of 1974, and the rest, as they say, is history.