



**The International Soroptimist – March 2008 edition from International President Margaret**

“THANK YOU – HANCI

YOUR HAVE DRIED UP OUR TEARS AND GIVEN US HOPE FOR THE FUTURE”

These were the words I noticed on the wall on an embroidered plaque in the Office of the Director of HANCI – (Help A Needy Child International) in his Freetown Office – Sierra Leone. HANCI is our local partner for Project Sierra, our quadrennial project. The words touched me and sent a tingle down my spine – there was so much in those few words! But more of this later!

Having just returned from a six week trip where I had the privilege of meeting many Soroptimists and others who join us in ensuring all enjoy Human Rights and lead a life of quality I want to share my experiences with you. By the time I got home to Western Australia I was totally overwhelmed by the commitment and dedication of Soroptimists and felt truly humbled to be International President, A sincere thank you to all!

This issue has many articles about meetings attended during the last few months and in particular articles about Human Rights - my experiences for the last six weeks proved to me that Human Rights is at the top of our agenda.

My first stop was Belgium – the Union of Belgium was having their Annual general meeting and not only was I impressed with the conduct of the meeting and the presentations from the Programme Coordinators but also received a generous donation towards my President’s Appeal.

It was interesting to note how the money was raised – children were asked to draw pictures in relation to two words – Peace and Environment – these pictures were collated and used as blank notelets that were sold – very practical notelets that sold very well and made a sizeable sum for the President’s Appeal - Received with gratitude.

I learnt of another project that is being undertaken which I am sure could be repeated in any other country – children are sponsored to read – the more they read the more money they raise! The money raised is given towards buying books and other school equipment for children in countries where funds for education are limited. The parents are delighted the children are reading and so are the teachers and the children are improving their knowledge and learning about service to others at an early age! In addition children in developing countries are benefitting from funds donated.

The club of Val Brabant Waterloo in Belgium has taken on a massive project – the restoration of the chapel that was destroyed during the battle of Waterloo – The club has received an UNESCO award for this project and hopes to restore this chapel by September 2008. After this they hope to have a peace vigil at the chapel each year on International Peace Day in September. I applaud this club that is only 10 years old for taking on this massive project and for their commitment to completing it in a short space of time. I was fortunate to be taken there to see the surrounding area and refresh my memory of history learnt at school many years ago!

I was fortunate to meet many members from Belgium but also grateful that the Presidents of the Poland Union, The German Union and the Netherlands Union had made the time to come and see me during this visit. I was presented with a book from the Netherlands – “Refugees tell their story” and want to share a few quotes from that book:

The chapter marked Women –

From Somalia “Men have little to say at home. Father gives the money he earns to my mother. She decides what happens”

On Women’s Rights –

From Somalia – “My grandmother was illiterate, but she wanted her children to be educated. My mother worked as a teacher. Later she worked in a bank. We had a housekeeper. This is not an average situation”

From China – “It will take another three to five generations before there is equality in China between men and women”

On Family:

From Bosnia – For years father had a job in Germany. Then Mother was our father and mother at the same time”

On War:

From Sierra Leone – Oh please, rebels, give us peace. Leave us alone, we have suffered enough. We want peace forever. Governments, do something about it. We cry for protection”

This small book of less than 80 pages is full of poignancy but also full of hope for those who are free and can express with freedom what they have experienced. They share a burden they have carried for many years and that is now lightened with the help of Soroptimists and other like-minded people.

From Belgium I spent a few days in the UK before going to Sierra Leone to visit our Project – This was an experience more than I had anticipated – I was prepared for a rough ride – but this was not so – the roads may not have been the best but the warmth of friendship and the gratitude expressed by the girls at the various centres was incredible.

The Official launch of the project was in Freetown where SI got good publicity in the local papers; on the radio and on TV. The Staff of HANCI and the local Soroptimists worked extremely hard to ensure all was in place for the launch and this was at the British Council headquarters in Freetown.

The next day was an early start to the first centre – Bo. I was told these were good roads but one did have to raise an eyebrow every now and then at the large pot holes we encountered – nevertheless, our drivers were excellent and I did feel safe and well cared for. The centre is large and has only a few staff but trains girls as seamstresses; in catering; tie & dye

techniques; and other educational activities. Some of the girls have ambitions to become accountants; do commerce; become teachers.

All the beneficiaries as they are called by the HANCI staff were very grateful to Soroptimists, Hope and Homes for children and HANCI for providing them with opportunities for study and a better quality of life. We were treated to lunch cooked by the girls who were very proud of their efforts and it was a greatly appreciated meal too that we enjoyed. The fruit was grown in the gardens surrounding the centre – eating a pineapple that has just been picked and served was delicious!

WE visited some of the girls where they are working since completing training and once again the gratitude expressed made any discomfort insignificant – it was pleasure to be there and see the girls in action – proudly displaying independence and dignity.

From Bo we went to Makeni – once again greeted with song and dance as we arrived – I was amazed at the dedication of the staff at these centres – working tirelessly to ensure the girls and their children were cared for and on the road to recovery and a better future. The notes kept for each girl and her child are impeccable – limited use of electricity and water did not matter the work was done! The centres were clean and the girls and children happy and content.

We saw some of the girls that have started their own businesses and are living independently; they have done well and are now supporting their grandparents (mainly grandmothers) who had supported them during the hard times.

From Makeni we went to Kamakwie and then Tambakha which is near the border of Guinea – had to get there on a ferry that was made of timber and pulled manually by cables! Once again the welcome was tremendous – the whole village was there to meet us at the gates and we walked in the mid-day sun to be met by elders/chiefs (men and women). Among the many speeches was a phrase I had heard before and want to share here – The chief said ‘After the war many NGOs came and promised help but because of the bad roads none returned, yet HANCI returns every week despite rain or sun to ensure that we are well and to continue caring for us’ This gratitude from the whole village was sufficient to make this whole trip worthwhile.

After returning to Freetown we visited the centre in the city – Kiisi where once again we got a warm welcome and were shown around the centre. Here the girls after they finish their course as seamstresses are given a treadle sewing machine; cotton and material to start them off. Similarly the girls doing hairdressing are given a kit to start them with their first employment opportunity.

It was most gratifying to see the results of the work by HANCI and the Hope and Homes for Children and we can rest assured that we have valuable partners for this quadrennial project.

After Sierra Leone it was meetings in London for SPG and the Officers’ meeting in Cambridge before heading off to New York for the 52<sup>nd</sup> session of CSW. There is a full report of both CSW and the 5-0 meeting in this magazine so I will not repeat what happened. It was a busy time – this is the first time we had Federation Presidents attend CSW (at their own costs) – it gave me the opportunity to meet with them and I hope they enjoyed the opportunity to attend CSW. An important event that SI always participates in. This year I got the opportunity to meet with other NGOs who wanted to meet with us – like the WAGGGS (Girl Guides) – they presented in their workshop the 2001 SI President’s Appeal – Building Peace with Children in Africa and Soroptimists were given credit for this project. The WAGGGS webpage also gives us credit for this project.

It was interesting to meet Soroptimists who were not part of our official delegation but presenting workshops with other organizations or institutions.

Soroptimists are well known around the UN – thank you to our UN Representatives who have given us this lead. Our workshop in the UN building was well attended – standing room only and initiated good discussion. There was positive feedback from many sources.

After New York and a short break with family in the USA I headed home via New Zealand where members of the North region were celebrating 25 years after their Annual General Meeting. Once again it was good to hear the reports of what is happening in the local region and how members are working towards our Programme Focus objectives. Many dollars; many hours of service and many smiles to go with it all seemed normal.

This was a most amazing journey for me as I travelled different parts of the world, met members in their own countries, experienced their local cultures and foods and was given a warm welcome no matter what time or place. In each place I felt at home – speaking the same language and discussing the same issues – in all every member wants and strives to do her best to ensure we all enjoy equality, peace and harmony.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue of TIS, it is action packed - The Vienna Forum on Trafficking; CSW in New York; 5-0 meeting and much more.

In conclusion I quote a verse from the refugee book I spoke about earlier – The poem is called “My beautiful Afghanistan” and written by Sitara who now lives in The Netherlands

With my experience today

I have good friends with whom I don't only go to the bay

But with whom I also share

My joy, my pain

My past and future every day.

In friendship

Margaret

International President

March 2008