

20th Soroptimist International Convention 9th -12th July 2015.

Report by National President Margaret.

President Margaret was accompanied to Istanbul by IPP Noreen, Incoming President Sarah, P R and Media Officer Irene, Tess SI Cork and Ciara Maguire Public Speaking student. The Theme of the Conference was **Soroptimists Educate to Lead – Fresh Ideas Empowering Women**. We registered early on Thursday 9th July and we had the day free to explore Istanbul visiting the Grand Bazaar, the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia. We returned in time to prepare for the Opening Ceremony. Turkish Drummers welcomed 1450 Soroptimists from the four Federations. The Master of Ceremonies was the Convention Chair Emine Erdem. The Flag Ceremony and Roll Call was emotional and moving and we waited eagerly to hear the Republic of Ireland called, we proudly stood up.

The speakers all had a welcome message to delegates. President Ulla Madsen SIE asked us to treasure what we have done in the past and what we will do in the future. International President Ann Garvie asked us to smile as smiling costs nothing and is a sign of friendship. She asked us to continue as Chariots of Fire, mirroring the Vision of Soroptimists. The Manager of L'Oreal, the main sponsor of the convention, shared how his company works to help women and girls through a partnership with Soroptimists.

We then listened to a traditional story and music from Anatolia, we must dream, turn our dreams into vision and make the changes we want. A Friendship Evening and meal by the poolside and garden of the Hilton Bosphorus brought the day to a close.

Friday morning 10th July started with two Keynote Speakers.

Elif Shafak, an International Best Selling Author, told us of her early experiences as the daughter of a single mother who returned to Turkey to live with her own mother. Elif's grandmother raised her to enable her mother access to education. She spoke highly of her grandmother and her influence on her early childhood and her loneliness. She stressed the importance of being an individual and not defined by someone else. Writing is a lonely art, the writer is alone and the reader is alone.

Michael Kaufman, Educator and Author and Co -Founder of White Ribbon Campaign, Canada 1991 told us how his campaign uses innovative approaches to engage men and boys to promote gender equality. He raised our awareness of gender stereotyping and how we inadvertently encourage gender inequality. This campaign seeks to get men and boys signed up to not committing, not condoning and not remaining silent on Violence against Women. Michael is an advocate for transforming fatherhood, with men doing half the parenting, childcare and housework.

His message was strong, determined and clear- we must end men's Violence Against Women.

An Opening Plenary Session followed – Educate to Lead- Chaired by Alice Wells. **“Far we've come, far we need to go”** Three speakers highlighted the following Gender equality as a key component of corporate sustainability. Women's Empowerment, Women in Business,

Opportunities for all, educate ourselves. Poverty main obstacle to children's entrance to education, girls left behind more than the boys, better investment to educate the boys! We need to understand the difference between education (knowledge) and employability (skills, self-confidence and the use of knowledge)

Friday Lunchtime Irene and I attended Open Heart Open Door Lunch, where we met and shared ideas and exchanged contacts. Members offer hospitality, student exchanges or house swaps

On Friday Afternoon there were six parallel sessions (choose one)

- The Power of a Second Chance – never too late to go to school, learn to read or write. Emphasis on effect of Drugs, Alcohol Abuse and Homelessness.
- Women and Islam – understanding the vocabulary, the values, the cultural diversity of this religion. Facing the challenges of being a Muslim Woman today?
- Responsible Leadership in Times of Crisis – Do men and women make the same decisions under pressure? What is the impact of this on the world we live in? What are the challenges of involving more women in decision making/
- Making your voice heard at Local, National and International Level – opportunities to share experiences of lobbying, raising awareness on issues which effect women the world over.
- Projects – From Design to Deliver – The success of a project depends on several factors, goodwill and good planning. Designing and implementing projects varies vastly. Three members presented three different types of projects.
Sarah Mc Cormack, National co-ordinator for Positive Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Project outlined SIROI involvement in this project.
Emine Erden SI Turkey gave us the history of Balat Culture House set up in 2010 by Soroptimists.
Jennifer Luz-Olsen SI Vista California outlined the horrifying facts of Human Trafficking in America and the work of Soroptimists in that area.
A discussion followed and Sarah represented SIROI with pride. Now lots of people know where we are on the map!
- The Divine Feminine – “Spiritual and emotional equilibrium is as crucial as medical treatment.”

The workshops were followed by a Plenary Session- Advocating for Gender Equality. Speakers UN and Council of Europe Representatives. Less process and more results needed. Less about new mechanisms and more about monitoring and implementing mechanisms in existence. Bridge the gap between Civil Society and Policy Makers. We cannot accept anything less than a planet 50/50 by 2013.

The SIE peace Award, conferred every two years to honour someone for a remarkable achievement was bestowed on Dr Edit Schlaffer, Founder and Director of Women without Borders, for her work on Women's Roles encountering Radicalisation and Violence- Educate to Peace. Edit accepted the award “on behalf of all women who are willing to join us to make the world a better place”

Friday Evening's Social Programme gave a choice of

1. Bosphorus Cruise with Traditional Cuisine and Music
2. Traditional Turkish Night with Henna Show
3. Whirling Dervishes – Turkish Folk Dance
4. Marbling Workshop.

Saturday 11th July began with a Plenary Session – Topic- Women's Status in Turkey. Many successful women spoke of their experiences and perspective on women's capacity for social leadership, they included Aysegul Ildeniz, Global Vice President, Intel New Technologies, Turkey and Hasan Suel, President of Vodafone Foundation, Turkey. This was followed by a keynote address on Violence against Women by Rashida Manjoo, UN Special Rapporteur. She highlighted the challenges that need to be addressed. Violence against Women is endemic, it is a human rights issue with health, political and financial consequences. We were reminded that violence against women and girls varies in type, in intensity and outcomes. It is shaped by social, political, economic and legal factors in many complex ways, and it is always rooted in the unequal power between men and women. Anne K Ream, Author and Founder of "The Voices and Faces Project" spoke about the power of storytelling for victims of violence. It provides a sense of possibility and solidarity to others who have lived through violence.

Saturday afternoon had two sets of interactive sessions with some overlap. The first session included

1. Violence against Women – focussing on Human Trafficking.
2. Education a Right not a Privilege – Second Chance and Lifelong Learning.
3. Women's Economic Empowerment –because of traditional laws and practises women living in poverty struggle to gain access to Capital or Banking Systems.
4. Making your Voice Heard - Repeat session.
5. Media and Communication – Use of Media and especially Social Media is indispensable in running the organisation.

The second session included

1. Poverty and Prosperity – Do women have the right Rights? Role of Soroptimists to advocate for laws which empower women and promote gender equality.
2. Innovative Strategies for Empowering women – Jenny Vince, Federation President and two entrepreneurs shared their experiences of running a business and stressed the importance of networking, mentoring, coaching and flexibility for employees.
3. Save the Planet – Solar Power, See Solar Cook Solar, Renewable Energy, Soroptimists in partnership with other organisations.

With workshops over it was time to concentrate on the social Event of the Conference- "**The Convention Dinner**"- it was held on the Rumeli Terrace in the Convention Centre overlooking the Bosphorus. We were treated to Turkish Cuisine and music from many countries and the atmosphere was fantastic. We had the opportunity to network and meet new people.

Sunday Morning. The last morning of this amazing conference arrived. It was very exciting for us. Five young ladies, each a winner in her own country presented her speech. We were so proud to support Ciara Maguire, representing the Republic of Ireland, who spoke passionately to the topic “How High can a Girl Fly”. The other speakers were Alana Hughes, Northern Ireland; Flora Garner, England; Tan Yan Ru, Singapore and Rose Lakoro Pitoi, Papua New Guinea. The girls were given a standing ovation for several minutes. Maureen Maguire, Chair, presented the girls with a beautiful plaque and International President Ann presented each student with a cheque. International President Ann was so proud to showcase these young women and the power of Public Speaking.

The closing Plenary Session of the Conference was “Listening to the Voices of the Future” where four Soroptimists aged between 30 and 40 years told us why they joined Soroptimists over other women’s organisations. After they had spoken they were asked to give a key message to Soroptimists, these included

- Embrace technology, continue to change and evolve
- Keep communication lines open at all times, listen to the voices and be transparent
- Work alongside other groups and network at every opportunity
- Form networks for younger members between clubs and mentor and coach them
- “No Success without Successors” have respect and gratitude for those who went before us.

Following this each Federation President was given the opportunity to showcase an outstanding project

1. SIGBI President Jenny Vince choose The Kori Project – Sierra Leone
2. SI America, President Poco Davis – Dream it Be It - Girl’s Education
3. SI South West Pacific, President Carolyn Hudson – Walk the Talk – Stop Violence against Women
4. SI Europe, President Ulla Madsen – Educate, Exchange Connections 2013 – Back to school, Youth unemployment, language a barrier to education and integration.

Next was the announcement of **The 21st International Conference to be held in Kuala Lumpur from 18th – 21st July 2019** with the theme “Reaching for the Sky”. We were given an insight into Malaysian Soroptimist Clubs, their Country and culture through video, song and dance.

International President Ann cut her speech short due to time constraints but highlighted

- See Solar Cook Solar Project – the money raised will be used to support the Soroptimists of the Turkish Union to provide solar lamps for the Syrian Refugee See Solar Cook Solar Project – the Camps and Solar lamps will be provided for Nepal to help in the recovery from the recent earthquake.
- White Ribbon Campaign – President Ann asked for a Global commitment for Soroptimists to partner with the White Ribbon Campaign to eradicate Violence against Women – zero tolerance. This can be achieved by individual clubs working with White Ribbon.

- President Ann asked all Soroptimists to use Social Media to influence, campaign and effect change. Change the mind-set of those with power and great influence and move into the future as “Chariots of Fire”
- Finally International President Ann handed the Chain of office to International President Yvonne Simpson.

As International President Yvonne accepted the chains she was welcomed on to the stage by her fellow Soroptimists from New Zealand with traditional song. They clothed her in a Chief’s Cloak, in recognition of her role and responsibilities. The new President encouraged us all to be supportive of each other and validate each other’s actions. We all want to know was that ok?

Nepal was the Presidents main focus as she had first-hand experience of the earthquake in Christchurch and felt a connection with Soroptimists in Nepal. December 10th Presidents appeal will raise funds to rebuild women’s lives in Nepal.

The SI Flag was handed from Conference chair Emine to the 2019 Conference chair Siew Young to be brought to Kuala Lumpur.

The conference concluded with a selection of Traditional Turkish Dance.

I am honoured and privileged to be National President in the year of the 20th International Conference and I was proud to represent Soroptimists ROI at this amazing Conference in Istanbul. The Conference was very worthwhile, with excellent key speakers and workshops. It was challenging, it was inspiring and a good learning curve for all of us. We had the opportunity to meet great like-minded people from all over the world, exchange ideas and email addresses and form some friendships.

I would like to congratulate Immediate International Past President Ann on a wonderful conference and on her commitment to Soroptimists and her role over the past two years. Best wishes to International President Yvonne in her new role.

I will finish by reminding you of two things.

International President Ann opened the Conference by asking us to “Smile”

International President Yvonne closed the Conference by asking us to tell each other “Yes it is ok”

In Friendship

President Margaret Geraghty.

July 2015.