

## 50<sup>th</sup> North South Conference May 2016

Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> May, the final preparation day for that long awaited 50<sup>th</sup> Annual North South Conference had arrived. Sitting at my breakfast table I pondered over the list of jobs to do, scolding myself for not having some of them already done, checking my e-mail, reading the last of the reports for the AGM while taking phone calls and answering e-mails to Soroptimists who are hoping that we can still find place for them at the conference. For so long we in SI Mullingar wondered who will come, how many will come, will enough come to make it a success – and now the worry is how can we accommodate everyone, are the registrations right as the numbers are getting higher and higher. Soroptimists words still ring in my ears “Sarah the Delegates List has to be finalised now, it has to go to print... we have 38 clubs represented”.

Valyrie rings me to say the signs are up with blue and yellow balloons to show soroptimist the right exists to take on the roundabouts, surely no one can get lost. Josephine rings to say we have another sponsor something else for the goody bags and Mary tells me the early golfers are checking into the hotel. We are on the count down, one more sleep to go!

Friday morning arrives, it is the long awaited day, the start of the weekend that brings alive all the hard work and planning for over a year. Everyone asks – President Sarah did you sleep – Yes I sure did but not enough hours in that night!. The golfers took to the course at 10 a.m. with the golfing committee having everything so well in hand but no control over the weather – it could have been better, much better! The winners a very well kept secret until the presentation that night at the social dinner.

I take a trip to Bloomfield, all is relatively calm. While the golfers played away our many exhibitors were busy setting up their stalls and displays to tempt the visiting Soroptimists to spend some money with the local traders. Let's hope the temptation worked!

I arrive back to Bloomfield (after the hairdressers where my phone never stopped ringing everyone looking for me) at 4 p.m. for the Pre AGM meeting. I pushed open the door to enter the foyer full of Soroptimists. Registration is a buzz, soroptimists are in a queue at the hotel check-in and there are smiling faces and laughter all around. I can hardly believe my eyes as I observe the blue jacket of International President Yvonne Simpson, all the way from New Zealand chatting to Federation President Margaret. I glance to my left and see Immediate Past Federation President Jenny Vince, Past Federation Presidents Pat Black, Maureen Maguire, Joan Smith all in different groups chatting to many Past National and Regional Presidents and many long standing members. I pass a smile to my Mullingar Soroptimists working so professionally checking names and handing out registration bags. There is always excitement in getting the registration bag... any surprises... oh yes – good lots of surprises including “Ask me why I am a Soroptimist Note Pad” with a specific North South Pen... a snickers bar, some healthy snacks! One hopes all are happy and that soroptimists give a thankful thought to President Sarah and Mullingar Soroptimists who organised these gifts and packed the very reusable Conference Bags.

I meet and greet and hastily go to the Pre AGM meeting with my Executive Team. With an efficient Executive Team and supported by a wonderful National Secretary Monica Joyce our meeting finished

on time and we rushed to our rooms for the change of outfit for the Civic Reception and Social evening. The excitement increases as two 50 seater buses arrive at the hotel at 6.30 p.m. to bring all to the Atrium Building in Mullingar for the Civic Reception hosted by Westmeath County Council. I get a call from Westmeath County Council to say the weather is too unpredictable so sadly we cannot gather in the Tranquillity Garden with the Green Mental Health Seat installed by Soroptimists Mullingar to mark the Local Mullingar and National Project for suicide prevention and positive mental health. Soroptimists observed this seat from the window of the bus and admired the way it wraps around the bark of the very old Sycamore Tree in the garden. The seat is made of steel and has the ten tips for positive mental health crafted into different sections of the seat.

Another bus arrives with the Soroptimists and friends who are staying at the Mullingar Park Hotel. Soroptimists merge with many invited guests from Mullingar for the Civic Reception. We are welcomed into the Atrium by the well known and renowned Mullingar Town Band. Over 160 Soroptimists, their guests and invitees by Westmeath County Council enjoy finger food and refreshments in advance of the formal Civic Reception. The Civic Reception begins and Mayor Adrian Duncan welcomes all the visitors and recognises the work of Soroptimists Mullingar & District over the past 25 years and the honour that Mullingar feels in having me as the first National President from Mullingar. I am thrilled to be presented with the Westmeath County Council Scroll of Honour and I accept this on behalf of Soroptimists Mullingar & District. In my acceptance speech I articulate the work of Soroptimists not just in Mullingar, nor Ireland but right across the world. This was a fantastic opportunity to share with the many non soroptimist guests our work as soroptimists.

The Civic Reception concluded with the Mayor presenting President Marian Mortell, SI Mullingar & District and Founder President Rhona Kelly with the Genesis Lady of Peace and they presenting the Mayor with the Genesis Children of Lir which is so much associated with Mullingar with Lough Derravaragh just kilometres away from Mullingar.

Following the Civic Reception, President Marian Mortell, SI Mullingar & District welcomed all soroptimists to the conference and then Federation President Margaret Emsley officially opened the conference and wished us all a very good and rewarding conference. This then followed with Ms Joan Smith SI Bangor launching the Republic of Ireland Soroptimist History Book compiled by Tess Hogan and Monica Barry a well kept secret. It was the wish of Tess and Monica that Joan be invited to do this launch and this unknown to Tess and Monica was very special to SI Mullingar as Joan Smith attended the Charter Dinner in Bloomfield House Hotel 25 years ago as the Northern Ireland Regional President – remarkable how events can come together.

If that was not enough for one evening there was still more to come – another big surprise. I invited Irene Walker SI Wexford to join me to launch the new Republic of Ireland badge. In my visits to the clubs many of you raised with me the question about our badge - the loss of the international emblem and the use of the Dynamic S pin. There was confusion on what to wear, many of you said we need a proper badge!. I thought and thought and then called in the wonder soroptimist lady, many of you call her the Soroptimist Scarf Lady – PRO Irene Walker and together we made this happen. Well I hope that you like this new badge, it combines both the Dynamic S and the Soroptimist International emblem. It was a privilege to present the new badge to International President Yvonne and Federation President Margaret and a number of Past Federation Presidents and National Presidents. The badge was commended by all and has gained great interest across the

soroptimist world. Its demand has gone beyond our dreams and Irene is probably as she would say herself "too busy" dealing with the sales! It is priced at €10 and all profit will go to the publication and promotion of our organisation in the Republic of Ireland. Irene will be selling the badges at the Networking/Fun Day in Mullingar on 3<sup>rd</sup> September and at all other Soroptimist gatherings.

After all that activity we were delighted to return to Bloomfield to enjoy our evening meal. And then came the presentation of the golf prizes organised by Mary Kerrigan SI Mullingar & District. The first ladies prize went to Sheila Cassidy SI Mullingar & District. The men's prize going to Finian Joyce Castlebar with our National Secretary Monica Joyce taking the third ladies prize.

When all winners received their prizes we were taken by surprise to be entertained by the singing chef from Bloomfield Hotel who was retuning to Italy for his third wedding - or was he really the chef from Bloomfield .... many not so sure! Eventually the night was done and a few hours sleep was had.

Saturday morning started with a very successful AGM attended by over 100 Soroptimists. Sarah Wray SI Bray was elected as the Membership Officer and Eileen Lawlor SI North Kildare elected as one of the representatives on the National Women's Council giving us four representatives to this council. After the AGM I was thrilled to meet Immediate Past International President Ann Garvey at the coffee break as she had made great efforts with her busy schedule and arrived late the previous night. All the pieces in the jigsaw were coming together.

At 11 a.m. we all gathered in the Belvedere Suite for our Saturday conference proceedings. President Marian Mortell gave us all a very warm welcome to Mullingar. It was my pleasure to chair this session and began with our Public Speaking winners from North and South who gave a wonderful delivery of their winning speeches demonstrating a key All Ireland soroptimist project. They were no easy act for Peter Cosgrove CPL to follow. However Peter soon took the attention of the audience with the title for his presentation "Why Women are your future – The future of Work". The important points I took from his presentation were the changes that have taken place in the world over the past 50 years, how technology is doing away with jobs and the jobs the ipad is doing away with. On a different theme gender diversity is not a problem it is a solution and I liked his reference to the ageing challenge for Europe and reminding us that In Germany, researchers found that the nation could increase Germany's workforce by up to 2 million people by 2025 if they raised the female participation rate. I was left with much for thought from the video "*What does it mean to do something like a girl?*" and the reference "*There is a special place in hell for women who do not help other women*" - *Madeline Albright*. He recommended us to:

- Sell the benefits of what we do
- Focus on the younger generation
- Involve men in what we do

Ailish O Connor, OLAS reminded us of the increase in the use of technology and the trends towards social media, the ever increasing numbers using facebook and twitter. Most remarkable is how twitter is becoming much more attractive for use compared with facebook. Ailish confirmed the support of OLAS to the work and development of Soroptimists in different ways.

Federation President Margaret shared with us the Soroptimist 2020 Vision and International President Yvonne told us of her work as International President and why she took the time to come

to this North South Conference... why because we the women of Ireland never let politics or war come between us and the work that we do together for our communities.

Marie Louise O'Donnell then came to the stage and took command of the audience. She used the theme of the conference Communicating ... she told us her story of coming from the West and entering the Senate... how a man from Kerry told her how she represented the public by showing her the people on the street under her window! She emphasised the power of *The Story* ... challenged us on how we tell our story of soroptimist work. What story do we have to tell?. She also told us to focus on the benefits not on the doing. She then told us her story of going to the Wedding Fare and meeting that lovely girl who said the G Hotel was fantastic.... fantastic... fantastic... fantastic but yet she could not get from her why it was so fantastic – why she should have her wedding there! All during her session the laughter of the audience could be heard ringing down the corridors of the hotel, soroptimists wiped away tears of laughter from their cheeks and not one complained that she was keeping them late for their lunch.

This concluded the morning session and we all enjoyed a light lunch entertained by Ceoltas Ceoltoiri Eireann.

We then took to the buses for the afternoon tours to Belvedere House and Gardens, Longford Cathedral and follow the Joe Dolan story. We started these tours with Mullingar “Going Orange - by visiting the Pilgrims sculpture, which was commissioned by SI Mullingar and District, with orange flags, balloons and umbrellas to raise awareness to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> day of each month to wear orange to bring focus to overcome violence against women. When I was planning the conference Barbara Harrison SI Wexford asked if we could remind people of the 25<sup>th</sup> day of each month for orange and this small idea grew into this gathering in the town of Mullingar. Thank you Barbara. This is all about Soroptimists working together.

The reports from the afternoon tours were all very positive each one very different but it was delightful to hear all soroptimists were satisfied with the choice they made.

At seven o'clock we all gathered for the Drinks Reception to start the 50<sup>th</sup> Annual Gala Dinner while we waited for the arrival of Ms Mary Harney and Mrs Sabina Higgins. The buzz and excitement was electric. The music from the Mullingar Harpists added to the occasion. The red carpet stretched out from the door. It was a wonderful feeling of achievement to stand on that red carpet and welcome these very distinguished guests and soroptimists and guests who had come to join us for the gala dinner including past members from SI Mullingar. After some photographs including the group photograph of all the Past National and Northern Ireland Regional Presidents we sat for dinner and yes there was a goody bag on the chair – one for everyone!.

While we sipped wine and eat canapés Mary Harney, the pre dinner speaker so eloquently reminded us of the role that women play in society and the many challenges that face women right across the world. Women's issues are still there to be addressed and that it is by us all working together we can take on these challenges. She identified opportunities for Soroptimists and our work to be linked with other similar bodies. Having enjoyed either Beef or Salmon for our dinner Mrs Sabina Higgins gave her address and reinforced the need for a focus on equality for women and the need for women to work together. She recognised the voluntary work of women to society and the great challenge we face to overcome violence against women an agenda that President Michael

D Higgins is pursuing. We all enjoyed the fun and good wishes from the nine toasts that followed all in the soroptimist tradition. And then there was the cake – and this was a cake just too good to eat – no other colour than blue and yellow so well decorated with the Soroptimist logos and 50 years for the Associations and 25 years for SI Mullingar all made and decorated by Mary Wynne SI Mullingar. Thank you Mary for this wonderful cake which we didn't eat until coffee on Sunday morning.

We concluded our evening with some presentations one being a presentation of a plant to Mrs Sabina Higgins which will be set in the garden of Aras an Uachtarain and be tagged for our Soroptimist special occasion and be there in the future for us to view. Both guest speakers gave very generously of their time to meet, get photographs taken and to chat with the dinner guests afterwards. Soon many of us took to the floor and danced the night away to Sandra Dolan. Another very short night until we were back for the Ecumenical Service and the closing ceremony.

Sunday morning arrived sooner than we wished but a 10.30 start was not so bad. Over 100 of us gathered together for the Ecumenical Service. The service was very much enhanced with superb music and hymns by St Finian's Musical school. The service included a special candle service which had a candle for each club and a special candle of HOPE for us all for the future and a special entrance procession bringing forward various symbols of the work that we soroptimists do. Very generous contributions were given at the benevolent collection which raised over €800.

And then we were at the final piece of the jigsaw the closing ceremony. President Alice and I joined together to close the conference and present Presidents Elect Maria and Mary each with an orchid plan to remind them that as the plan gets bigger the time gets shorter for Conference 2017. We concluded our morning with a piece of that special cake and a parting gift for everyone as they said their good byes.

I was asked to write a report on the conference so instead of writing a formal report I have written my story of the conference. Everyone that was there has their story and these stories are powerful. Thank you to all soroptimists and friends who came and made this conference such a success. It was a special year, a special occasion and I am assured as I look around my house at the many thank you and congratulation cards received that you enjoyed this conference and felt it too was special.

I hope you have enjoyed reading this my story of the 50<sup>th</sup> Annual North South Conference 2016 – Thank you for making it such a success.

***President Sarah  
6<sup>th</sup> June 2016.***