

“ASK ME WHY I’M A SOROPTIMIST”

Presented by Rosalie Byrne Muir at the National Association Meeting in Dublin November 2015

My Club is Ennis & District

I can remember the word “Soroptimist” from a time when I was quite young – not because my mother was a Soroptimist – she wouldn’t have been accepted as she moved in different circles in the Ennis of those days. But the word floated around Ennis and the club was vibrant, the women were to the forefront - and the word SOROPTIMIST was out there in the ether, as they say.

My own story started stutteringly. In 1996 I was about to leave Ireland with my husband and daughter for a posting in Malaysia. A member of the Ennis club – a former National President – mentioned to her sister that it would be helpful for me to make new friends in Malaysia if I joined the Soroptimists in our town as this would give me an immediate circle of international friends in a new and strange city. My friend and I were proposed - but my nomination was not accepted.

Those were the days when you had to be invited to be a member and your letters had to be read at two separate meetings for consideration before being accepted.

Anyway, my family and I headed off to Malaysia. While we were very happy there it was a bit like our own recession here - suddenly, after just 10 fantastic months, we were heading home because of the problems at the time with the Far East economies.

My friend said let’s try again and this time I was accepted and we both joined. And, incidentally, I really do think that it is always good to join with a pal.

I became secretary to several of our local club Presidents and in 2004 Ennis Club President.

I remember my first National Association Meeting – it was in Wynns Hotel in Abbey Street and it was quite a lively affair. The clubs were voting on a National Project and I recall one of the three proposed projects was to ban plastic bags – I thought “that will never catch on”! Now look at us!

The work of the clubs nationally and locally was awesome at the time. There was the Caring for Carers, National Rehabilitation Centre Dun Laoghaire, and later the “65 Roses” campaign. It was one major cause after another.

I had a personal tragedy in 2008 but I found myself surrounded by a most wonderful comfort blanket by the ladies of my club. Nothing intrusive – just always someone there and I don’t know if I fully realised it at the time.

Also at the time, unlike now, there was a problem getting members to take on the role of National President and my memory is that Tess and Monica were scouting the country for people to take on the role. They approached Ennis and there were three of us who had been delegates and were eligible. One lady wasn’t interested and it was between two of us. I felt I couldn’t do it without my husband’s support so my friend agreed to take it on. But then I changed my mind and she, very graciously, stood aside and let me take the nomination.

It absolutely changed my life.

Being National President lifted me out of an enormous hole – the enormity of which I don't think I fully realised at the time. It was 2010/2011 – the country was in an awful way – my life, apart from having to hold things together for my daughter, had no clear path.

Professionally – again like many people at that time - I was in a bad place. In addition I was dealing with a very difficult, controlling and dispiriting boss.

But when I took on the role of National President – succeeding Pat Braiden at the SIGBI Conference in Manchester in October 2010 - I had something unique to me that I could do that took me out of that orbit and raised me above that difficult work situation - something I loved doing - with the support of wonderful women – I mean that **wonderful women**. I visited many of our clubs, enjoyed the social aspect and made friends for life. I also visited clubs in Northern Ireland and we had our joint North/South Conference in Portadown in May and the Friendship Week in Ennis in September.

I also learned so much. At the SIGBI conference in Manchester my colleagues from Ennis and I toured the stalls showcasing projects being worked on by different regions. We came home filled with enthusiasm for the BEEPLUS project for junior schools (which by the way is now available on our website and can be downloaded by teachers)

But, most memorably, my colleagues and I got a fuller understanding of the trafficking issue. We launched the SWALK initiative **S**oroptimists **W**orking **A**gainst **T**rafficking and from that joined *Turn Off the Red Light*. Many projects have taken off from that initiative in various forms with involvement of clubs with different statutory and voluntary bodies who are at the forefront in confronting this ongoing problem.

I was also fortunate that my year as National President coincided with the Soroptimist International Convention in Montreal in July 2011. While the annual SIGBI conference is always a source of new friends, the Soroptimist International Convention moves to another realm - as I know the ladies who attended Istanbul this summer will agree. It was a privilege to realise that we belong to such an amazing international organisation with a voice at the UN and contribute to so many international causes all over the world.

I want to urge any of you thinking of taking on a national role to go for it. There is tremendous support and encouragement – a great feeling of achievement.

May 2016 is being promoted by SIGBI as Membership Month. One of the ways they are doing this is by promoting the “ASK ME WHY I’M A SOROPTIMIST” initiative.

For me - I will proudly say, “I’m a Soroptimist because we are ladies who

INSPIRE ACTION, TRANSFORM LIVES AND DO EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO EDUCATE, EMPOWER AND ENABLE WOMEN AND GIRLS TO ACHIEVE THEIR POTENTIAL.”

Thank you.

Rosalie Byrne Muir

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