

How Zonta Taught Me that a Better World for Women is a Better World

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It is such a pleasure to be back in District 12! The last time I was with you all was fourteen years ago, at your 1998 conference, and I had a wonderful time. Thank you for inviting me back!

It is an honor to be here as a past Zonta International president, possibly the most fun job in the organization. But I need to remind you that I'm speaking only for myself, and not for ZI or its leadership, but just as a Zontian with a fair amount of experience in the organization, although certainly not as much as some of you have, with a lot of commitment to our mission – advancing the status of women worldwide through service and advocacy - *and* to the concept that Zonta clubs, Zonta districts, and Zonta International, working together, can and do achieve that mission.

Sheila asked me to talk about my life in and out of Zonta. The only problem with that request is that my life isn't particularly interesting. I was raised in Palatine, Illinois, about 30 miles northwest of Chicago. Palatine wasn't a very exciting place; indeed, when I was interviewed on a radio program in Brisbane, Australia, when I was president of ZI, the host introduced me by saying, "To all of you who feel stuck in the middle of nowhere in the Outback, I say, 'Listen to our guest today, because she's really from the middle of nowhere: Palatine, Illinois, USA!'" All I could think was, "Thank God my sisters aren't listening to this show; they would kill me!"

In the fifties and sixties, when I was in elementary and high school, the plight of women around the world was not exactly discussed at the dinner table. My parents had three daughters, and often told us how important it was that we get the requisite training so that we could support ourselves – in case something happened to our husbands.

I went to high school in Palatine and in my junior year I was one of about four girls in the first year of a two-year honors math class program. The boys in that class bullied the girls in every class, yelling, interrupting when a girl asked or answered a question, and so on. I complained to the teacher, whose only response was to say, "Boys will be boys." Fifty years later I'm kind of surprised at how much the situation affected me – I think it was just that it was so totally unfair, and that the teacher could have

remedied it and did not. I really didn't want to put up with it for another year, and found out that the University of Illinois would accept students without a high school diploma if they had a certain number of credits and passed some proficiency tests. So I went to Champagne, took the tests, got admitted, and that was the end of high school.

My major was music education, with an emphasis on string bass. My ambition was to play the bass in a major symphony orchestra. There were two problems with that goal: first, in the 1960s major orchestras did not hire female string players; and second, and probably more importantly, I had no musical talent. So after a year I changed my major to mathematics, but I wasn't really very good at that, either. Then in 1966 I got engaged and very soon unengaged, and my father suggested I take a year off, spend some time working and living at home, and then go to Europe for awhile. I jumped at that opportunity, and in January 1967 went to Paris to study French and cooking, and then traveled for a couple of months. Some guys I met invited me to go with them to Afghanistan and I accompanied them as far as Tehran, which was a real eye-opener. In the same stretch of downtown sidewalk there were women in miniskirts and women in burkas, and I think that was when it hit me that the vast majority of women in the world lived lives very different from mine or from the lives of anyone else I knew.

I came home in August 1967 and went back to school. As I noted, I wasn't particularly good at math, and various professors suggested that in lieu of graduate school I apply to law school, so I did. I had gotten married in 1968 and in June 1969, two months before the start of law school, I learned that I was pregnant; my daughter was born the second week of my second semester of law school.

Among other things, law school made me question why so many people seemed to think that women couldn't do various things, like be lawyers, or doctors, or engineers, or construction workers. The faculty offices of the school were on the second floor of the building, and the prevailing attitude was summed up by the labels on the doors to the restrooms on that floor: "Faculty Men," and "Staff Women." In fact, there was no women's restroom at all on the first floor, where all the classrooms were.

I graduated in 1972 and shortly thereafter we moved to Washington, where the chairman of the National Labor Relations Board hired me as a staff counsel. A year or so later, I got divorced. In the next few years I was promoted to senior counsel and then assistant chief counsel, and in 1980 the Board appointed me an administrative law judge.

About a year later my secretary caught me as I walked into my office one day and said, "Judge Jones wants you to call him." I said, "But he's in Lexington, Kentucky, on a case." And she said, "I know. He has a problem and he wants your advice." Well, my little head just puffed right up, and I called the number my secretary gave me. A woman answered the phone, and I said, "This is Judge Benard calling Judge Jones." The woman said, "Oh, good, they're waiting for this call." Entranced with my own importance, my head swelled some more. And then the lady came back on the line and said, "He'll be right here. Thank you, operator." End of swelled head.

I stayed with the NLRB as an administrative law judge until 1987, when I was appointed a judge at the Drug Enforcement Administration. I became the DEA's chief judge in 1991 and retired from that job two years ago.

From the time I moved to Washington my father kept telling me about friends of his in Wisconsin who belonged to Zonta, that it was an organization of women who were executives or professionals, that it did great things for women, and that I should join it. Well, Dad was always trying to get me into things that I wasn't interested in, and I figured that the last thing I needed was to join some women's club. After all, at that time my colleagues were mostly men, the lawyers who appeared before me were mostly men, and the witnesses were mostly men. I had a daughter and sisters, and my best friend was (and still is) a woman, but most of the people I dealt with were male.

Then in 1981 I got a telephone call from the program chairman of the Zonta Club of Washington, asking me to speak about my work at the club's October lunch meeting. I said something to the effect of, "Do your members really want to hear about this rather obscure agency?" and the program chairman said, "Oh, yes, I'm sure they'll be really interested." I thought she was nuts, but I figured that my dad would be happy if I made contact, so I agreed to speak. I did ask whether any of the members had even heard of the NLRB, and she assured me that they had not.

I put together a talk that was basically NLRB 101, hoping that I wouldn't put anyone to sleep, and went to the meeting. As lunch was served the president turned to me and said, "I'm really looking forward to your talk." I said, "Oh, are you familiar with the NLRB?" And she said, "Yes, I was an attorney for the Board, but I was laid off in 1948." And then another member said, "I was, too!" I don't remember what we had for lunch; I was too busy rewriting my speech.

Anyway, I was really impressed with the women I met that day, including a judge on the United States Tax court (who married my now-husband and me five years later), several other lawyers, the owner of an insurance agency, an accountant or two, a cartographer, and a bunch of executives in the public and private sectors. Many of them had been the first woman to hold whatever job they had, and felt that they had been very fortunate to be successful, and they also felt that they had an obligation to give back. They were committed to helping other women – not just middle- and upper-class women like themselves, not even just women in Washington, D.C., but all women everywhere, and I was thrilled when they invited me to join the club.

The following year the club was looking for a fundraiser, and I suggested that we sponsor a 10-kilometer race through a park on the Potomac River, near the Tidal Basin (where the cherry trees are). The members thought this would be fun and, since I was the only jogger in the group, I became the ad hoc race director. Well, there is a reason it's called the "tidal" basin, and that reason became clear on race day. It rained, the course flooded, and the runners were in water up to their hips. The Zontians' cars, parked near the course, had water in the back seats. It was an unholy mess, and to add insult to injury, we made very little money. I thought that my Zonta career would be very short-lived, but instead I got elected to the club board.

In 1984 I went to my first International Convention – in Sydney, Australia. It was an unforgettable experience and started my love affair with Australia, which has now lasted almost 30 years. I was thrilled to be president of Zonta International at the time of our second convention in Australia, in 2006, notwithstanding that I made six trips to Australia between 2002 and 2006. That is especially ironic because, when I heard in 1983 that the convention the next year would be in Sydney, I just assumed that I wouldn't go – too far, too expensive, too everything. But I changed my mind when my now-husband said, "Honey, I think you should do it. After all, you'll probably never have another chance to go to Australia!" Little did he know!

That convention gave me a sense of Zonta as an international organization and as an organization in which members have a voice.

In 1989 I was elected president of my club and then was area director, lieutenant governor, and governor of District 3. While I was area director I was also International bylaws chairman. I've always thought I was very lucky to have those two jobs at the same time because they offer very different perspectives on the organization: as area director of a compact,

mostly urban/suburban area, I was trying to help clubs address local issues; but as bylaws chairman I was trying to see a bigger picture and examine the consequences of bylaws proposals – especially the unintended consequences. The 1992-1994 biennium, when I was bylaws chairman, was also when what was then District 14 split into five new districts. District 14 had comprised almost all of continental Europe – about 260 clubs and something like twelve countries. I was only peripherally involved in the division, but that effort enhanced my understanding of international issues that as an American I had not previously had to think much about, especially issues such as whether districts should be determined by national boundaries, how cultural considerations should come into play, and so on.

In 1998 I was elected an International director and spent the next eight years on the International board, as director, vice president, president-elect, and finally as president in 2004-2006. I also spent four years on the International Foundation board during that period, where I had the great good fortune to serve with Jacki Sammons. I rounded out the International experience by serving again as bylaws chairman in in 2006-2008.

So, what did I learn in all this time?

First, I learned early on that as Zontians we have so many opportunities for amazing experiences. At that first convention, in Sydney in 1984, one of the speakers was an Amelia Earhart Fellow named Laura Kay, who is an astronomer. She later became the department chairman for physics and astronomy at Barnard. Laura took me up on the steps of the Sydney Opera House and showed me the Southern Cross – an experience I will never forget. Also at that convention I met an optometrist from Brisbane name Heather Waldron. We were both joggers, and one morning we decided to run across the Sydney Harbor Bridge. Unfortunately, we somehow missed the pedestrian path and ended up in the lane reserved for tractor-trailers. Fortunately, we survived, and so did our friendship.

Second, I learned that we can make a difference, even if our resources seem hopelessly inadequate to address a huge problem. When I was president-elect I wanted to propose an international service project focusing on HIV/AIDS in Africa, but I just didn't see how the amount of money we could spend could possibly make a dent. Then someone referred me to an article in the Toronto Globe and Mail about Stephen Lewis, the UN special envoy on AIDS in Africa. In that article Lewis, one of the first to emphasize that the face of the AIDS pandemic in Africa is female, mentioned several small organizations that were helping women combat HIV/AIDS, and I thought, "If they can do it, so can we." We started looking for a project that

would combine improving the lives of women living with HIV with advocating for better treatment and prevention, and came up with a successful microfinance project for women in Niger who were affected by HIV/AIDS. The Zonta International Foundation funded that project from 2004 to 2008.

Third, I learned that the whole really is greater than the sum of its parts, or, more specifically, that a committee or board can be much more than the aggregate of its members. My experiences on various Zonta boards and committees taught me that synergy happens, that is, that a group of people working together with the objective of filling a common need will do a better job of filling that need than any individual member can. In 1993 Pat Fluharty, at that time an International director, had the idea of Zonta International sponsoring a summit on violence against women. That summit happened in 1995 in Virginia, and because I was local I was asked to be on the organizing committee. That group really came together, each member contributing her own skills, ideas, and insights, and the result was a three-day conference that discussed the causes, costs and consequences of, and solutions to, problems of violence against women. To our surprise, the event netted nearly \$60,000 and was the genesis of Zonta International's ZISVAW program.

Fourth, I learned how valuable the fellowship of Zonta is. The common goal of improving the lives of women, particularly disadvantaged women, is a powerful bond among us. That bond enables us – more, encourages us, to connect with Zontians in very different professions, occupations, environments, and cultures, than our own. And those connections frequently result in friendships that last for life.

Having spent my professional life as a lawyer in a city of lawyers, married to a lawyer, among neighbors who are lawyers, I am very grateful for my Zonta friends whose careers are very different from mine. As someone from the middle of the American Midwest, I am thrilled to have built enduring friendships with Zontians from Amsterdam to Austin, Chennai to Christchurch, Melbourne to Miami, and Toronto to Tokyo. These friendships have enriched my life.

Sheila asked me to talk a little about leadership in an organization such as ours. Unfortunately, being a judge is not the best career training for someone who wants to be a leader in a volunteer organization. As a judge, I was very good at listening – but skeptically, looking for anomalies, not for ways to build consensus. And my courtroom was most definitely not a

democracy: I made the decisions and I lived with the consequences; teambuilding was not part of the equation.

So I had to learn a lot. Here are some of my most important lessons:

1. Listen. Try to focus on what the other person is telling you instead of on what you want to hear or on how soon you'll get a chance to talk.

2. Abandon preconceptions – don't assume you're right.

When I was District 3 governor I had a wonderful district board; when I walked into my first board meeting as governor with all my bright ideas, the board – very politely – shot a bunch of those ideas down. I was really disconcerted – and then realized that although as a board we were united on the big picture, that unity, even combined with our affection and respect for each other, did not guarantee that we would always agree on a course of action. It was a valuable lesson.

3. Two important premises that I find very useful:

a. there is always a reason – it may not be a good reason, but there is a reason. When I was area director there was one club where the immediate past president and the current president were practically in a shooting war. The immediate past president was career military and the current president was an artist – and their styles were totally different. But the real problem was that the current president wanted to change the name of the club to encompass the whole county. The past president didn't want to do that because she wanted to start another club in the county and wanted to use the county name for the new club. But she never told the current president what her objection was!

b. you don't know what you don't know.

Zontians are usually fairly far along in their careers before they join Zonta, so they know how to do their professional or entrepreneurial jobs. But when they join a club they usually don't know much about the organization, and because they don't know what they don't know, they don't think to ask. Anticipate questions – the old adage about putting yourself in someone else's shoes is valuable, both to you and as a reason for serious mentoring of new members.

4. Get to know other Zontians. I mentioned earlier that I have formed strong friendships with quite a few Zontians, and I am deeply grateful for those friendships. But Zontians are quite a lot more than interesting and lovable people – an awful lot of them are experts at something, and probably at something that you are not.

And I think most of us have had the experience of encountering a Zontian who initially impressed us as a difficult person; I'll quote a club

president' experience at the recent convention as recounted in her club newsletter: She noted that

. . . the same two or three people got up before nearly every vote to raise nitpicky points of order when the rest of us, with our quivering fingers poised over our voting machines, just wanted to plow through and get it done.

Then, at the closing banquet, to again quote the same club president: Sitting next to me was a woman who raised a bunch of points of order during bylaws and projects discussions. I thought I'd end up in an argument with her before dinner was over.

. . . [But] during dinner I found out that the point of order woman next to me is a brilliant, lovely person who has twice served on the International Board. When I asked, she explained that she brought up those points to make sure that technical issues didn't later derail the motions and the intentions of the delegation. Aha—a little message from the universe for me about listening and patience.

Two years ago at the District 3 conference, Carol Beaver, who has been a member of my club for 47 years and is the cartographer I met at my first meeting in 1981, talked about how Zontians make a difference to each other. As one example, Carol described how members of the club not only encouraged her to take advantage of an opportunity to return to school for her master's degree, but at one point gave her material for an important research paper; and later figured out a way for Carol to finish the program when she thought she would have to drop out. After emphasizing that had it not been for her Zonta friends, she would not have managed to get the degree with a 3.75 GPA, Carol closed her comments by saying:

Building true and lasting Zonta friendships requires time. Time to talk and listen to each other. Time to work with Zonta friends to meet Zonta goals. And time to have fun together. One on one conversations, in person and by phone, are essential to building these lasting friendships.

I agree with Carol. Building those relationships is a lot of work. But the investment pays off. I met Naomi Arnold, from South Australia, briefly at the 1996 convention when she was elected to the International board. For the next two years, when I was governor of District 3, she was my board liaison, and came to the 1997 district conference as the International representative. We stayed friends, and to my great joy she agreed to chair the 2006 international convention when I was president. Those of you who were there would, I hope, agree that it was a terrific convention – due largely to Naomi

and her convention committee. I would never have imagined in 1996 that our friendship could earn such a fantastic dividend ten years later.

Several years ago Jacquie Sammons told me a story: There were three Zontians who died. They got up to heaven, and St. Peter said, I'm sorry, you can't come in. Well, the Zontians protested of course, and he said, "I know you're good people, but we are doing renovations in Heaven right now, and we don't have room for you. So, my dears, I am sorry to have to tell you to go to Hell – just for a while." Well, the Zontians were not very happy, but there wasn't much they could do about it, so off to Hell they went. About three months later the Devil called St. Peter, and said, "You have to take those Zontians back." St. Peter said, "We can't, the work up here isn't finished yet and we don't have any place to put them." And the Devil said, "St. Pete, you have to." And St. Peter said, "What's wrong – I thought they were pretty nice ladies." And the Devil said, "Look, they're holding bake sales and fashion shows and art auctions and raising all kinds of money and pretty soon they're gonna have enough to air condition the whole darn place!"

Well, that's what Zontians do – we identify a need, some way to make the world a better place for women, and we figure out how to meet that need.

And the need is enormous. Millions of people around the world are denied fundamental freedoms simply because they are women. In every part of the world, women face serious obstacles in obtaining equal access to education, basic health care, legal rights, employment, and economic resources.

According to the World Bank's 2012 World Development Report on Gender Equality and Development, the good news is that more girls and women are literate than ever before, and in a third of developing countries there are more girls in school than boys. But there are still too many places where primary and secondary school enrollments are much lower for girls than for boys. For example, in Afghanistan, Chad, and the Central African Republic there are fewer than 70 girls per 100 boys in primary school, and the school enrollment of girls aged 5 to 19 in Mali is equivalent to that in the United States around 1810.

We know that educating girls provides enormous benefits. Indeed, if all adult females in a country spend one more year in school, the per capita gross domestic product of that country increases by about \$700. Lawrence Summers, then chief economist and vice president, development economics, at the World Bank, summed up the situation at the Bank's annual meeting in 1992 by announcing that, "Once its benefits are recognized, investment in

girls' education may well be the highest return investment available in the developing world.”¹

You have probably heard about the “missing” girls and women – those who are not born or who die because of gender discrimination. That number is now about 3.9 million per year: Two-fifths of them are never born because of sex-selective abortions, infanticide, or neglect; one-fifth die in infancy and early childhood; and the remaining two-fifths die in die between the ages of 15 and 59.

One of every 10 women in Afghanistan and 1 of every 14 in Somalia and Chad die from maternal causes, and a much larger fraction suffer long-term health issues stemming from complications during and after childbirth.

Women farmers farm smaller plots and grow less profitable crops than men; and women entrepreneurs have smaller firms and make less profit than men. Indeed, women everywhere tend to earn less than men.

In many countries, women have less decision-making power and less control over resources in their households than men; a fifth of married women in India are not involved in spending decisions, even about their own incomes.

Only one-fifth of all government cabinet positions are held by women and the share of women in legislatures increased only from 10 to 17 percent between 1995 and 2009.

Women are far more likely than men to be killed, seriously injured, or victims of sexual violence by intimate partners. In Peru almost fifty percent of women are victims of severe physical violence during their lifetime and in Ethiopia 54 % of women reported physical or sexual abuse by an intimate partner in the past 12 months. Although violence against women is a flagrant violation of basic human rights and fundamental freedoms, in many nations it is perceived as acceptable or justifiable.

These depressing statistics demonstrate that gender inequality is an enormous problem. Can Zonta, as a relatively small organization, do anything about it?

¹ “Investing in All the People,” Economic Development Institute of the World Bank, EDI seminar paper no. 45, 1994, p. 1.

Yes, we can. We have to remember that even though we are not a very large organization or a very wealthy one, we can make a difference. The key to making that difference, in my view, is a careful, thoughtful combining of service and advocacy. I'd like to repeat that thought: the key to our making a difference is a careful, thoughtful combining of service and advocacy. If we focus only on service, without an effort to change attitudes, we will not have the long term impact we need to have. But if we focus only on advocacy, we will not maintain the credibility we have earned by putting our money and our hands-on efforts where our mouths are.

We Zontians are incredibly fortunate - and we believe that we have an obligation to those who are much less fortunate than we. We enjoy professional success – and we have an obligation to those for whom such success is still only a dream. Consequently, we are the organization for women who want to give back – because we realize the importance of a helping hand, a listening ear, a thoughtful mind, and a caring heart.

I have a story for you. Three guys are out hiking, and they come to a river that they have to cross. It is wide and deep, and they don't know how to cross it. It's raining, the river is rising, and they're pretty miserable. The first man says, "I wish I were strong enough to swim across this river." Well, God hears his wish, and gives him strong shoulders and arms, so the man jumps into the river and manages to swim across, just barely reaching the other side, totally exhausted. The second man says, "I wish I had the strength and a little bit better way to get across this river." Well, again God hears his prayer, and gives him not only strong arms and shoulders but also a log raft and a pole. So the man gets on the raft, pushes off, and manages to get across the river, but along the way he crashes against some rocks and by the time he gets to the other side he's pretty banged up. The third man says, "I wish I had the intelligence to figure out how to get across this river in better shape." Well, God hears this prayer, too. The man turns into a woman; she looks at the map in her hand, hikes up stream a hundred yards around the bend, and walks across the bridge.

I suggest that we have an opportunity and an obligation to give something back for those less fortunate than we, and when we can, to help them find the bridges.

I'd like to close with some comments I wrote more than twenty years ago on

WHY I AM A ZONTIAN

The kids are all screaming, the cat's not been fed;
The dog was just sick all over my bed.
The bathtub won't drain, I've got to call Roto-Rooter;
And the hard drive just crashed on my brand new computer!

Still, my home life is great compared to my work;
My assistant can't spell and my boss is a jerk.
And to make matters worse, on Thursday at two
I leave on a business trip to West Timbuktu!

All of this stress is one of the reasons I wanta
Belong to the service club known as Zonta.
It's a fellowship of executives who aren't made nervous
At the thought of commitment to community service.

From Baltimore to Bangladesh and Reykjavik to Rome
There are thousands of cities that Zontians call home.
And I can take comfort from the fact that I see
That there are Zontians worldwide who are all just like me

Thank you.