

## Soroptimist International: “The Best For Women”

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**F**rom government officials and corporate executives to doctors and attorneys, members of Soroptimist International represent a wide range of professions, ages and cultures. Together, however, they act as one “global voice for women.”

The name Soroptimist has its origins in the Latin words “soror,” meaning sister, and “optima,” meaning best. It is commonly interpreted as “the best for women.”

Founded in 1924 and celebrating its 85th anniversary in March, Soroptimist International of Long Beach (SILB) is a group of professional and business-women dedicated to improving the lives and condition of women and girls in the community and worldwide. Projects focus on health, education, human rights, economic and social development, the environment and fostering goodwill and understanding.

SILB is part of a worldwide organization boasting 90,000 members in more than 3,000 clubs in 126 countries and territories. In fact, SILB was the seventh Soroptimist club established, making it one of the oldest members of the international organization.

“I think we just don’t realize how much need there is in our own community,” says SILB President Margie Hersh. “We’re a very affluent community, but there is much need, and I think we all need to keep that in mind at all times – there are always people there that we can improve their lives just a little bit.”

Every four years, Soroptimist International partners with a charity, nongovernmental organization or United Nations agency to launch a major international project that is supported by members worldwide.

Its current Quadrennial Project is “Project Sierra: a Family and a Future,” which was launched in July 2007 to help find homes for homeless children in Sierra Leone, West Africa. In partnership with Hope and Homes for Children, the project will help vulnerable families target self-sufficiency; empower young mothers who are estranged from their families to become active community members; and guide children who are living on the streets back home.

In addition, an



Margie Hersh (center) heads Soroptimist International of Long Beach, which will celebrate its 85th anniversary in March 2009. The organization’s list of contributions to the community includes the creation of Meals on Wheels in 1971 and support of the Heart Healthy Resource Center at St. Mary Medical Center. (Photograph by the Business Journal’s Thomas McConville)

ongoing international campaign focuses on ending trafficking of women and girls, “which is huge in many countries, and I think larger than we think within the United States,” Hersh says. “They are not only trying to go after the traffickers, but also the patrons – because without the patrons, the business would dry up.”

Ending domestic violence and aiding the elderly are also important initiatives at SILB, which founded Meals on Wheels of Long Beach in 1971. Originally started as a service project at the First Congregational Church in Downtown Long Beach, the program was incorporated as a nonprofit corporation in 1972. For a nominal fee, Meals on Wheels provides home delivery of meals for people who are unable to prepare meals for themselves due to illness, disability or age.

Recent major projects include Senior Links, which helps at-risk elderly women live independently by connecting them to social service workers and health nurses; a \$25,000 grant to fund a Soroptimist

Women’s Heart Healthy Resource Center at St. Mary Medical Center; and supporting the Soroptimist Women in Trades and Technology Center at Long Beach City College.

Moreover, money generated from SILB fundraising efforts such as its annual Holiday Boutique – this year scheduled for November 15 – are ultimately returned to the community through scholarships and service programs. In fact, between July 1, 2007 and June 30, 2008, SILB provided nearly \$40,000 in grants and scholarships to women and girls.

In addition to actively working with local nonprofit organization BLAST to sponsor a girl power program that aims to empower underserved and disadvantaged girls, SILB organizes Shopping with Soroptimists, a joint program with Working Wardrobes that outfits women who are entering or re-entering the workforce with business attire.

“Helping women improve their lives has always been a goal of mine, and I felt that this organization best supported my goal,” says Hersh, who has been a member for 12 years.

One of the highlights for her has been SILB’s sponsorship of the S Club at Poly High School – a service club founded in 2004 that prepares high school girls for leadership roles in the professional sector. The girls are offered mentoring opportunities with SILB members, who work with them on community service projects.

“I think that has motivated them to want to make giving back to the community and to the world a part of their life,” Hersh says. “To see their development and growth has been most rewarding.”

The group meets weekly, September through June, at The Grand on Willow. On October 8, the guest speaker is Alyce LaViolette, MA, MFS, discussing,

“Is It Anger or Is It Abuse?” LaViolette is a pioneer in the field of intimate partner violence. The October 15 meeting will review state ballot propositions for the November 4 election, and the city’s first lady, Nancy Foster, will discuss, “Needs of Children in Long Beach” on November 12.

For more information about Soroptimist International of Long Beach, visit [www.si-longbeach.org](http://www.si-longbeach.org). ■



Margie Hersh is president of Soroptimist International of Long Beach, a nonprofit organization working to improve the lives and condition of women and girls in the community and worldwide. The local chapter will be celebrating its 85th anniversary in March. For more information, visit: [www.si-longbeach.org](http://www.si-longbeach.org). (Photograph by the Business Journal’s Thomas McConville)