

Memorial Fund Recipient Blog

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6 months ago, on a hot May evening, I received an email from SIGBI stating I was one of the 4 Memorial Grant awardees for 2016. I squealed with delight in the middle of the road, obviously attracting a few awkward glances.

6 months later, I was in Malta, on the 8th of November. The blue skies and the sea seemed to be embedded with the spirit of Soroptimism!

My first experience of a Federation Conference began on the morning of 10th November, when I attended the FPAC Meeting. While I was mostly trying to grasp the ways of SIGBI, I did learn a lot. The reporting format was demonstrated, and the importance of reporting in line with the UN SDGs was emphasised.

The evening saw the formal opening of the Conference, followed by the Flag March of all countries and the lovely Paul Curmi dancers. It was a great opportunity for us for fellowship and bonding with fellow Soroptimists!

The second day began with the 'Pink by the Pool Party' in support of Breast Cancer. Every Soroptimist attending the Conference came dressed in pink, some such as Federation IPP Margaret herself wearing cute little pink tutus, some with pink headgears and wigs, one as the Pink Panther. I was in awe seeing the jovial and fun loving nature and sporting spirit of everyone present. Surely, age was just a number which was no barrier when it came to having fun!

Later in the day, we had the privilege of hearing many accomplished speakers. The first key-note speaker of the Conference was Dame Professor Sue Ion DBE, FREng. The striking feature of her talk was how young girls even today are not encouraged to study engineering, and how it is really important to make them take up this stream for steering change in future.

We also heard Bandana Rana, Committee Person of CEDAW (elected in 2016) speak of her stride in taking up the cause of women in Nepal, and establishing a NGO called 'Saathi' in 1992, which was a shelter home for victims of domestic violence.

Interesting presentations were made by the clubs who won the SIGBI Best Practices Awards in 2015. I was intrigued to see that the women of our fraternity had gone out of their ways to help advance the cause of women and girls so that they may be educated, enabled and empowered!

In the general Meeting which followed, some important resolutions were voted for. The Resolutions for SIGBI to apply for Charitable Status, to be set up as a separate trading company and the capitation fees for younger members to be reduced were carried. The Resolution to remove the post of IPP from the FMB was however, lost.

On the 12th of November, International President Yvonne Simpson began her speech with the greetings "***Tena Koutou, Tena koutou, Tena koutou, Katoa***", which roughly translates to "Greetings, greetings, greetings to you all!"

She then spoke on how engineering is about making something happen, bringing together all the people, resources, planning, to achieve something greater for the future, it is about problem solving to making it happen.

IP Yvonne posed the question, "How do you engineer to bring about the best outcome?" She outlined that the SI Board has a Vision for the future, one where Soroptimists have an impact.

She highlighted how no country has still achieved gender equality and how advocacy is the key for SI.

This was followed by the speeches of the Federation Presidents of the SI of Americas and SI South West Pacific Region, RoseMary Reid and Theresa Lyford.

Shortly thereafter, the Best Practices Awards for 2016. It would be interesting to quote Federation Programme Action Director Barbara Dickson here, who said that it was so difficult to choose one winner from the several projects that come in, because every project is so well thought of, planned and implemented. It is commendable to see that Soroptimists all over the globe work with such vigour to make the world a better place!

The third day saw more speakers including key-note speakers Sara Ezabe Malliue, Steve Arthur, Dave Coplin and Dr. Helen Sharman.

Sara, being a very young social activist from Malta spoke of her plight of being discriminated against because she wore the hijab and was a Muslim. She spoke of how she embraced the hijab out of choice and because she strongly believed in her religion, and not because it was forced upon her. She said that people discriminate against others (the minorities) because they fail to understand the essence of humanity. Her message was to embrace multiculturalism which would help us engineer the future.

Steve Arthur, who is associated with Water Aid, spoke of how gender discrimination occurs against women and girls due to access to clean water and sanitation, and how it was Water Aid's goal to provide universal access to clean water and sanitation by 2030, which has been recognised as a basic human right by the United Nations only recently.

Dave Coplin, the CEO or Chief 'Envisioning' Officer of Microsoft was vibrant and entertaining, and he kept us spell bound by what he had to say on how to harness the power in our pocket. He stressed on how we should make technology work and not let technology make us work in an highly technology driven era.

Dr. Helen Sharman happens to be the first astronaut from Britain. She spoke of her journey to space, and left us inspired with the words 'seize the moment'. These three words are often used under many circumstances, but listening to Helen's talk gave real meaning to them!

Very soon we approached the end of the Conference, which seemed to have passed in the blink of an eye! The Change of Insignia took place with the installation of Ann Hodgson as the new President of SIGBI for 2016-2017. This was followed by the exchanging of collars by the outgoing and incoming presidents of National Associations, Regions and Networks.

The conference closed with an electrifying performance by Red Electric, which made everybody hit the dance floor and sway to their music.

The Conference was over no sooner than it began....months of waiting eagerly left me with lessons and memories which I will always cherish. I thank SIGBI for the opportunity it gave me, and I would urge it to encourage more young girls like me to come up and participate in such conferences, because Soroptimist is not just another NGO or charitable institution, it is a movement which gives us the chance to participate in policy making and decide a better future for ourselves and the generations to come!